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THE
BEAUTIFUL
MRS. DAVENANT
—
VIOLET TWEEDALE

1. Fiction (English)

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THE BEAUTIFUL MRS. DAVENANT

A NOVEL OF LOVE AND MYSTERY

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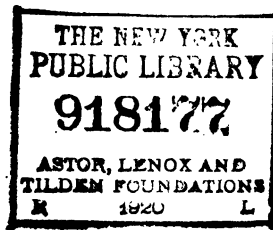
BY

VIOLET TWEEDALE

AUTHOR OF "GHOSTS I HAVE SEEN," ETC.



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THE BEAUTIFUL MRS. DAVENANT

THE BEAUTIFUL MRS DAVENANT

CHAPTER I

THE COMING OF MRS. DAVENANT

THE sun was beginning to decline. The hot September afternoon was wearing on into evening, and the three hours' dusty journey was drawing to a close.

The beautiful Mrs. Davenant looked across at her only traveling companion, whose name she now knew to be Miss Letty Thorne. The girl was staring dreamily out of the window, apparently lost in her own thoughts, and the silent watcher concluded they must be very happy ones, not only because of what she had seen, but because of the tender little smile that played over her face.

Not exactly a pretty face, decided Mrs. Davenant, it's more elfish than pretty! The delicate features were finely cut, but had no girlish roundness, and there were traces of care and anxiety on the young brow, and the large thoughtful gray eyes were shadowed. Even the soft hair that waved back in natural ripples from her cheeks seemed of too pale a hue against the colorless skin. Yet, withal it was a face

that some one loved, and the low tones of the gentle voice had an underlying note of passionate feeling.

Mrs. Davenant thought of the warmth and passion of that parting she had witnessed at the carriage door before the train moved out of London. "How wise they are," she thought, as she watched their utter indifference to onlookers. "They both seem to understand that in order to seize the opportunity of a life-time, it must be seized during the life-time of the opportunity. They instinctively seem to realize that they may never meet again, so they're taking time by the throat and damning the consequences."

A man, young, finely set up, with a strong, good-looking face, had taken Miss Letty Thorne in his arms, and quite unabashed had given her several warm, lingering kisses.

"Good-by, my own darling. Cheer up. It won't be so long before we meet again," and Letty Thorne's reply had been inaudible, muffled in a tweed breast. Mrs. Davenant had strained her ears to catch it. All her sympathies flew to attention. She was profoundly interested, for she adored a love story, and believed firmly and unalterably in love. There was nothing to touch it in all the wide world. It was the only gift really worth having, and those two young creatures, favored of the gods, had discovered this pearl above price, and were treasuring it as the gift of heaven. She, herself, had known what it meant, but only for a very short time. It had cost her dear, yet she would not have been without it, and never had she swerved from her belief in its superlative desirability. The glimpse she had of that parting inclined her warmly towards her traveling companion. She longed to hear the whole story, and enter into its

miracle, for to every woman a real love affair always is a miracle, but after making friendly overtures to her Miss Thorne had not even distantly approached the enthralling subject, though she had been communicative on others.

Whilst the train rushed along they had admired a lovely old manor embowered in woods, and she had smiled and said, "How beautiful, and how different from my home!"

"Where is your home?" asked Mrs. Davenant, very gently.

"A narrow, red brick house in the dullest street of Hammersmith. That is my home."

"And your father and mother live there, I suppose?"

She shook her head sadly. "I have neither. They died years ago. I live with my aunt, Miss Fanny Thorpe." Then she had gone on to speak quite simply and naturally of her past history, of her solitary childhood spent in a tiny London house, of her mother's death and her father's long illness, and of the yet sadder days when he was gone, and her mother's sister had adopted her. A weary life that had been for the girl. Her aunt had striven to do her duty, but it had been sternly done, and she had neither patience nor sympathy with the young. Letty Thorne knew she was a burden, and there had been little love between them.

After all this never a hint or word of the big young man who had so adoringly embraced her on parting. Though now in mufti, he had obviously been through the war. He looked a soldier, every inch of him. In that impassioned farewell he showed himself to be a born lover.

Mrs. Davenant was disappointed, though she was

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careful not to show it, and the girl had gone on to say that she was on her way to spend her holidays with her uncle, her aunt's only brother, at the Lake House, a couple of miles outside Great Glentworth. The house, she had heard, was so named because there had once been a big lake in its park. Now the lake was overgrown, and had become little more than a pond. She had seen her uncle, but never his house, and she rather dreaded the visit. As a child he had been cross and disagreeable to her, and the only words she could remember his having spoken were, "Go away and be quiet."

Aunt Fanny always referred to him as "very peculiar." He had never married, and was domineered over by an old housekeeper.

Mrs. Davenant listened to all this with rapt attention. "How strange," she kept whispering to herself. "How strange, yet I knew a Thorpe still lived there. I've done with Thorpes for all time, but their seal is indelibly imprinted on my life."

"You say you are going to spend holidays with your uncle; do you then work for your own living?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm a governess. My pupil is a very delicate girl of twelve. She's gone to the sea with her mother, and I'm not required for some weeks. Aunt doesn't need me at home, she's going to stay with friends. Mr. Thorpe's only taking me in to oblige his sister."

Mrs. Davenant smiled into the pale dreamy face, and thought again of that parting. Life could not really be gray with such a lover as that to see one off by train and give one such adorable kisses.

"You must come and see me at Little Glentworth. My name is Mrs. Davenant, and a dear friend lives

with me named Miss Agnes Howard. She's already installed, and I've taken the house on lease. I am charmed with the beauty of the country, and very tired of town life. Probably the Lake House is only a mile or two away. I believe we are just running into Great Glentworth station."

The train had slowed down, and in another minute or two Mrs. Davenant and her traveling companion found themselves on the diminutive platform, with a footman and a solitary porter handling the luggage.

"Good-by, and thank you ever so much for your kindness to me," said Miss Thorne, offering a timid hand. "May I really come to see you?"

"Why, yes! I'll send a note to the Lake House. Of course you've some one or something here to meet you?"

The girl blushed scarlet and shook her head. "Oh, no. You see I've only got a tiny trunk which can be sent for, and this suit-case is quite light. Uncle doesn't even know what train to expect me by, and the short walk is nothing." She turned aside in hurried confusion, but Mrs. Davenant stopped her peremptorily.

"I'll drop you, Miss Thorne. You shan't run away like that. No, I insist. Please don't argue with me; I'm sure we pass your gate on the way to Little Glentworth."

She put a restraining hand on the girl's arm, and they moved out of the station together to where a motor-car was in waiting with a top capable of carrying a considerable amount of baggage.

Mrs. Davenant proved correct. The Lake House must be passed *en route*, and soon they were running through the tiny village, and emerged on to the broad

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white high road. In another ten minutes the chauffeur began to slow down, and finally drew up opposite a very dilapidated pair of iron gates. They stood ajar, and beyond them stretched a deeply-shadowed road which turned out to be the short approach to the Lake House. It was a tangled thicket of briars and weeds, and even Mrs. Davenant's warm-hearted sympathy was unequal to having her car badly scratched by the heavy overhanging boughs. At the girl's earnest request, she and her luggage were deposited just inside the gates, and with a sinking heart Letty Thorne watched her new-found friend disappear in a cloud of dust. Then she turned and resolutely moved forward to the dreaded meeting.

CHAPTER II

THE HEART OF THE MYSTERY

IN the midst of dense dark woods the Lake House stood alone.

Letty Thorne saw it for the first time under the most favorable circumstances, in all the luxuriant beauty which summer could wrap around it; but when she entered the doorway it struck her that she left the brilliant sunshine outside. The interior looked dark and forbidding, and as if no sun-ray had ever penetrated its brooding twilight.

The bell was obviously broken, so she crept into the big stone hall and stood listening intently. Not the faintest sound of life fell upon her ear, and she stared round her in growing apprehension.

"It is like a mausoleum, a house of the dead. How can I live here even for one night?" she asked herself.

A few old portraits hung upon the walls between strips of tattered arras. Damp and decay would soon make an end of both. Four closed doors, two on each side, and a crazy-looking uncarpeted staircase faced her, and whilst she stood in miserable hesitancy the sound of a short dry cough roused her to action. Summoning all her courage she moved forward and turned a door handle.

When she set foot on the oak floor of the room

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which her uncle, Geoffrey Thorpe, chose to occupy as dining-room and library in one—when she glanced up at the low heavily-beamed ceiling, her courage ebbed away; yet she had not come unprepared for the gloom of the place.

Aunt Fanny, in her rare expansive moments, had spoken of the old family home as desperately depressing. Her brother had inherited it from a cousin, and had passed from a life of extravagance and constant indebtedness to considerable wealth and great penuriousness. The sudden change in his fortune seemed as suddenly to change his nature, and instead of keeping up the comfortable establishment he had inherited, he retained one woman servant only, dismissing all the other old retainers and shutting up the greater part of the house. Aunt Fanny had said that by this action he had turned the county against him, and that his housekeeper cowed him completely by virtue of the power of a strong mind over a weak one. She had added that her brother's peculiarities had given rise to much gossip in the neighborhood. Silly folk said the place was haunted. The peasantry would not approach it after dark, and the gentry shuddered when they spoke of its dreary, neglected aspect. Through the woods surrounding the house and thence to the willows by the lake wound a path, which tradition said was kept bare by no mortal feet. The cottagers called it the "Ghost's Walk." "But don't mention this subject to your uncle, whatever you do," had admonished Aunt Fanny. "If you wish to live at peace with him during your stay, avoid all mention of rumors and gossip."

Geoffrey Thorpe was seated in front of a table, a mass of papers under his trembling hands. As his

niece entered he looked up without surprise or curiosity and nodded curtly. It was not, however, his chilly and casual welcome which arrested her steps, and caused her to stand silent and motionless on the threshold. It was partly the great change that she saw had passed over him, and partly it was the portrait of a man which hung on the wall behind him. A large, defiant, aggressive portrait of a man. The eyes, filled with stern condemnation, seemed to fix themselves upon Letty Thorne. Yet the portrait seemed also to dominate the room, and its fresh coloring appeared to make the man who sat beneath it even more faded, more withered than he really was.

It flashed across Letty's mind that her uncle had purposely turned his back upon it, yet could not forget it. Why had he not removed it? What had so terribly changed him from the hale and active man of fifty she remembered? The snows of extreme old age were on his head and sunken jaws. His shoulders stooped painfully, and his keen glassy eyes, sunk deep in their sockets, were restless and suspicious. The only familiar thing was his voice, and the words he spoke.

"So you've arrived, have you! Well! now you are here I hope you'll give as little trouble as possible. I've only one woman in the house, and I'd do without her if I could. Please remember there's to be no friction between you. Mrs. Greatrex understands my ways, and will see you have what is necessary. You'd better be civil to her. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, thank you, uncle."

So this was all that was required of her. To give no trouble, and be civil to Sarah Greatrex. She might have asked where the woman was to be found, but she did not. Her pride was up in arms.

Geoffrey Thorpe had bent once more over his papers as if to signify that their interview was ended, and she turned and left the room as quietly as she had entered it.

Once more she stood in the dreary hall. A gnome-like man, half groom, half gardener, was carrying her luggage upstairs, and she inquired her way to the back premises. He jerked his head in the direction of a passage running to the left, and passing down this and pushing open a door ajar Letty found herself face to face with Sarah Greatrex.

The woman was seated before a log fire, upon which steamed a kettle. The great square kitchen felt and smelt like a vault, and the scanty furniture looked mouldering and worm eaten. Even the clock held its hands before its face as if to say "Don't enter. We want no one to disturb our deathlike sleep." In spite of the fire, and the soft warmth of the evening the place struck damp, chilly and utterly uninviting.

Mrs. Greatrex rose as Letty Thorne crossed the threshold. She kept her sewing in her hands, and responded civilly enough to the gentle "Good evening. I am Miss Thorne."

"You were expected some time. I've got a room ready for you, but most of them are shut up. You'd like a cup of tea, I suppose?"

Her tone was surly and unwilling, and without further words she turned to the door and passed out, Letty following her.

The appearance of Sarah Greatrex was repellent in the extreme. She was very tall and gaunt. Her black hair was thickly streaked with white, and very roughly kept. Her features were harsh, the skin sallow, and the black beady eyes furtive and restless.

She led the way up a narrow back staircase, which emerged on a long empty gallery. Passing down the creaking floor she opened a door at the far end. "This is your bedroom," she announced abruptly.

In the middle of the floor stood the luggage, and Letty Thorne walked forward to the window and looked out. A lump had risen in her throat, an unreasoning fit of deep depression enveloped her and she did not turn as she heard the door close behind the housekeeper. The situation appeared intolerable to her, but she struggled bravely against her forebodings, and turned her thoughts to the scene before her, which was lovely enough to banish gloom. There lay the beauty of waving woods, and checkered green and yellow fields. Beyond, rose up the dark red chimneys of some distant mansion, leaf-embowered, and beyond that again was the sky, aflame with pink and gold and imperial purple.

In the immediate foreground lay a weed-grown, stone-flagged courtyard, encircled by a moldering wall half hidden by brambles and ivy, and just outside those confines the neglected trees and shrubs clustered in wild luxuriance. The gate leading out of the court had vanished, and a pathway led through the foliage, and speedily lost itself in the dense green gloom.

It was as fair a scene as ever worshiper of natural beauty could wish for, but its very beauty and stillness filled Letty Thorne with a desperate desire to run away. She was unaccustomed to loneliness, and here her solitude would be well-nigh complete. A dread possessed her that when she turned round it would be to face the emptiness of a very grim room. There would be no voice to answer hers, no presence to miti-

gate the solitude. The change was so absolute that as she looked into the future, the glorious hopes and possibilities that reigned there had vanished into a far-off, dim obscurity.

A sound at the door roused her from out her dark reflections, and she wheeled round to find that a tray had been deposited upon the table, and the bearer of it had vanished without a word.

Whilst seated at her solitary meal Letty surveyed the large apartment. It was fast falling into darkness, but she discovered four candles, and at once lit them with a sense of relief in even the little light they afforded. There was but a sullen gloom reflected from the polished wood of the wainscot. The dark green hangings would have quenched the light of a brilliant illumination, and all the furniture was of a solid, serious kind of antiquity.

The room itself was large and low, and the walls were paneled with oak almost as black as ebony, while two great beams of oak crossed the ceiling. The mantelpiece was of the same dark wood, carved in grotesque taste, and with the patient minuteness of days gone by. There were half-a-dozen smoke-grimed portraits of long dead women and men. Two fine gentlemen in ruffs, and one in a periwig. The ladies were in farthingale, sack and hooped brocade. In the dim flickering candlelight they seemed to move uneasily in their tarnished frames. Against the wall stood a huge four-poster, shrouded in dark green tattered silk.

A fine room no doubt, but one calculated to depress the spirits of its occupant, thought Letty Thorne, as she peered around it with anything but pleasure. The sort of room where one might make the acquaintance of the Green Lady, or the little old woman in yellow

satin, with the clicking high-heeled shoes, who comes to the side of the bed and maliciously surveys its occupant till swooning or death relieves the pressure. Or, maybe, it is the sad and slender girl in white who walks here. The girl with the pale distraught face, and the blood oozing from her breast, who floats across the floor wringing her hands, and disappears through the wall. Or might it not be the man in armor, who sits staring into the fireplace till the beholder in the bed goes raving mad?

Letty laughed aloud at her whimsical fancies, and felt suddenly very tired and sleepy, for which she gave thanks in her heart. A wakeful night would not be a pleasant prospect. A distant village clock chimed nine, and she began to unpack.

For a moment or two she stood by a candle gazing down at a photograph she held. The portrait of a man, powerfully built, lean, muscular. The pose of the head was full of dignity and strength, as were the sincere, grave eyes. A face not without moral loftiness and intellect. Youthful and betraying the primitive nature of passion, but surely disciplined to the higher nature of control. The eyes seemed to smile into hers, and for a long moment she held the picture to her lips; then she wrapped it up again in a silk handkerchief, and with a little sigh put it back in her trunk.

"Ah! My beloved, what would life be to me without you?" she whispered softly to herself.

When the candles were extinguished, and she was in bed, sleep was slow to come to her, tired though she was. There was not a sound throughout the house, but through the open window drifted nature-sounds, the hoot of an owl, and the distant baying of a dog. In vain she repeated her prayers, and strove to fix her

mind upon their meaning. In vain she thought over her journey, and the beauty and kindness of her traveling companion. How lovely Mrs. Davenant was, with her masses of dark brown hair, her delicate features, and radiant smile. What a marvelous thing a smile could be, when so radiant and illuminating, and those big soft blue eyes fringed with black lashes, and the row of glittering white teeth that seemed to match the pearls at her throat.

Then her clothes were a dream of cut, finish and suitability. Ah! how delicious to have clothes like that, thought Letty, as she tossed and turned uneasily. A little breeze had arisen, and sang the old, old lullaby that it first sang when God divided land from water. Always sweet and sad as summer wind must be, it seemed laden now with dreams of the rosy future, with Divine mysteries, as it blended with those other nature voices of the night. Gradually Letty Thorne sank into the unconsciousness of dreamless slumber.

CHAPTER III

THE LADIES OF LITTLE GLENTWORTH

LET'S call this afternoon on Mrs. Davenant." Major Claude Carlton, owner of Great Glentworth and all its broad acres, was seated at lunch with his mother, under conditions which approached perfection. Superb health, above average good looks, owner of a very fine property with still ample means to keep it up, and not a personal care in the world. Such were the gifts the gods had showered upon him, and certainly he would have been duly grateful had he ever considered his circumstances, but when a man has known no other condition of life he is apt to take what is his as a matter of course.

He believed that he lived a very active life and there was no streak of indolence in his character, but after five years at the front his activities were now confined to doing the things he wanted to do, and thoroughly enjoyed doing. A soldier's profession was by no means irksome to him, and he very readily and intelligently rendered a good account of his stewardship at home, not so much because the good of his dependents was a sacred duty, but because, as a boy, he had been taught that certain courses of action would be expected of him and meant playing the game. He had come through the war without a scratch, and he never willingly referred back to his part in the terrible enterprise.

Mrs. Carlton winked one eye, and the single monocle dropped on its wire. She ceased contemplating through the open window the lovely lands over which the glamor of the bright September day was cast.

"Righto! I suppose they've settled down by now. The companion, Miss Howard—isn't that her name?—must have been in residence for at least a fortnight."

"And Mrs. Davenant arrived the day before yesterday. Webb passed the car on the road coming from the station. Looked like a big Rolls Royce, he thought. I'll be shooting to-morrow. I've asked Jim Hall, and I suppose you'll come out with us? Let's drive over this afternoon. Shall it be the car or the gees?"

"I'll drive the roans," decided his mother, "they've not been in harness this week. We can go to the Webbs if Mrs. Davenant's out. I owe them a call, but I hope she won't be out. I'm rather curious to see her. One has heard so much of her, and she's rather a mystery."

"I don't know anything about a mystery. I used to hear of her entertaining in town before the war. She's a well-to-do widow with a beauty reputation. I've never heard anything but good of her," replied Claude, helping himself to half a cold partridge.

Mrs. Carlton poured herself out a glass of Burgundy and held it up to the light.

"No more have I, dear boy, but no one knows who or what her husband was, or where her wealth comes from."

"Who cares a hang for any of those things? Blest if I do," retorted her son.

Mrs. Carlton smiled across at him in perfect agreement, and stroked down her back hair, which was cropped close to her head like a man's, only more so.

"I wonder she's never married again," she soliloquized aloud.

"Shows she's a woman of sense, my dear mother. What more does she want? She's got a rattling good social position and perfect freedom. She'd be mad to make a change, and she'll be an AI tenant. I feel we ought to run over to-day and see if she wants anything done. I'm willing to meet her if there is."

Mrs. Carlton readily agreed, as she always did when her one and only child made a reasonable suggestion. He was master, a fact she never forgot, and whilst she continued to act as the chatelaine of his beautiful home, she kept ever before her the frailty of her tenure. She had endured four years of agony, any day she might hear of her son's death; now she calculated that any day Claude might fall in love and bring home a wife, and her reign would be over. She had done well by the property, being preëminently a country woman coming of sound country stock, and when she married Squire Carlton of Great Glentworth she had entered into his work in stable, farm and garden in a practical, energetic and knowledgeable manner. She still rode to hounds, and schooled her home-bred hunters, and the Home Farm had never been let in her day, but was run, in her son's absence with his regiment, under her personal supervision by a competent bailiff.

When Claude had finished his thoroughly British education, consisting of all the sports, a smattering of the dead and no knowledge whatever of the modern languages, he entered the Guards. He might be, indeed he was, woefully ignorant of all social and political questions lying outside the tiny island of his birth, but he was a gentleman in the true sense of the word, and he understood that not to play the game was

an unforgivable disgrace. During his periods of leave which he always spent at home, he was well content to signify his approval of his mother's work, and leave his business affairs more than less in her hands. He was proud and extremely attached to his ancestral home. Those three sides of a square of old red brick masonry, with a tower in the center, and the long, wide grass terraces running down to the trout stream below, could hold their own against any of the minor seats of the English nobility. He loved that side of English country life which is so invigorating and healthy for mind and body. He had always been keen on sport, and had been brought up in the saddle by his mother, and shown the way "over the sticks" before he was ten. She had seen to it, that before he left Eton he rode straight, and could bring down a woodcock or rocketeer. That she had made a thorough man of her son was the fulfillment of her proudest ambition.

A deep friendship existed betwixt mother and son. When the squire died, the result of a chill caught at the cover-side, Claude was only seven years old, and the widow knew she had now to fill the *rôle* of both parents. The boy was thoroughly normal, daring, wild as a hawk, and up to any form of mischief, and so long as there was no tendency to vice the mischief was encouraged.

Sybil Carlton was enabled, owing to her splendid health and physical fitness, to share in all her son's pursuits, and they rode to hounds, stood at the cover-side, and strode the stubble side by side in perfect comradeship. The five years' nightmare was now a thing of the past. Claude had done well and come through. Mrs. Carlton did not think more of those

five years than she could help, and her son helped her to banish the hideous memory.

Now, at the age of thirty, Claude still looked upon his mother as his best pal. There had, of course, been other women in his life, but so far they had been but episodes, and he seemed in no hurry to marry. He had just let his mother's dower house to Mrs. Davenant for a term of years, without giving her possible need of it a passing thought, and Sybil Carlton had not deemed it necessary to put in the smallest suggestion of her claim.

As mother and son entered the drawing-room at Little Glentworth, Mrs. Davenant was also entering it by the conservatory door, and the two women as they shook hands presented a striking contrast.

Mrs. Carlton's naturally dark skin was tanned by wind and weather to the shade of a ripe chestnut, her lean face was a network of fine wrinkles, but her large brown eyes and excellent teeth were still in first-rate working order, and in its slender uprightness her figure was still that of a girl. The holland suit she wore was cut on the severest masculine lines, and the soft shirt and neat tie were the same in style and pattern as those of her son. In her hand she held a brown Homburg hat, which she always removed on entering a room, displaying an exceedingly smooth head of closely-cropped, iron-gray hair, white on the temples.

She stripped off her loose doeskin glove as she took Mrs. Davenant's soft palm in hers, and quite unconsciously surveyed her through the single monocle with the same appraising observation she bestowed upon her horses and cattle.

"So pleased to meet you. Hope you're shaking down and finding all you require," she said genially.

She liked what she saw. Yes! Mrs. Davenant deserved the epithet "beautiful" that was generally bestowed upon her, and though the antithesis of herself, Mrs. Carlton liked womanly women. There was too much of the male in her own composition to do otherwise. "A dangerous neighbor," was her first impression; then she laughed aloud at her own thoughts, and shot out her cuffs. "Well! why shouldn't he if he fancies her? It's time he settled." As she silently came to this conclusion, she turned to the introduction of Miss Howard, who just then entered. "An unusual pair of women," she decided as she sat down and discussed practical details, whilst her son conversed with Mrs. Davenant.

Miss Agnes Howard was not young, she was at least thirty-five, but she could scarcely have been handsomer at any time of her life than now. A big, grand-looking woman, with a clear olive complexion, no color, regular features, fine blue eyes, and dark brown abundant hair.

"Whatever the mystery may be they're both gentlewomen," concluded Mrs. Carlton, as she talked shrewd generalities, for though not choosing to argue out the subject with her son, she had made her own private inquiries from several generally well-informed sources.

"Yes," wrote her sister, Lady Tadcaster, who knew every one and went everywhere, "of course I know the beautiful Mrs. Davenant. Every one *dans le monde* does, and every one admires her immensely. She calls herself a widow, so I presume she is one, but I have never met any one who knew the late lamented. He's something of a mystery. A Miss Howard lives with her as companion, but not one of *the* Howards. You

will find Mrs. Davenant charming, well bred, rich and very good looking, also *very attractive to men.*" The four latter words were heavily underlined and certainly conveyed a warning. "The companion—I wonder," speculated Mrs. Carlton, as she studied Miss Howard, and noted the cut of her cream flannel coat and skirt, and the two fine diamond hoop rings she wore on her slim brown finger.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Davenant with her much quicker vision was taking in, as a complete picture, Major Carlton. She rather liked that quiet composure of manner which suggested the lord of the soil, though it was an absurd pose in these democratic days, she thought. She admired the big, strong type, the rather roughly cut features, the fair mustache and straight-looking blue eyes.

"I hope we're not disturbing you too soon after your arrival, but we thought perhaps we might be of some use to you. Possibly you might want some small alteration in the house or garden. I'd be glad to do anything that would add to your comfort."

He spoke rather slowly in a pleasant voice, and his smile was as slow as his voice. She was conscious that he addressed her with a certain freedom, though without a trace of familiarity, and by that she understood instantly that he was a man accustomed to women, accustomed to share with them the beginnings and endings of varied experiences, thus finding, perhaps unconsciously, a freemasonry in his most casual meetings with a woman who has passed through similar phases of life. His knowledge of women in the past assisted his knowledge of women in the present.

"That's very kind of you," she answered with her sudden flashing smile, "but we're very comfy. The

house is in excellent repair and quite up-to-date in essentials. I don't mind telling you I shouldn't have taken it otherwise. The domestic situation is far too strained to admit of water carriers or lamp cleaners. Every labor-saving contrivance helps in these modern times."

He nodded comprehendingly. "Yes! I felt that when I put in the baths and electricity. I didn't want Little Glentworth to remain empty. I'm glad you like the old place."

"I adore the old-fashioned non-essentials, Major Carlton."

He turned his head and looked round the walls, that slow smile dawning on his face. He was back for the moment in his boyhood. His surroundings exhaled upon his spirit the atmosphere of a past generation.

"You'll like most of the neighbors," he told her. "Some of them may go a bit slow for the times we live in, but take them all round they're not a bad lot, and we're all on good terms."

"I've met a neighbor already, and I want to hear more of her. We traveled down from town together. She's a Miss Thorne, a niece of Mr. Thorpe of the Lake House."

"Oh! Old Thorpe!" Carlton laughed drily. "You won't like him. That's to say if you ever meet him, which is extremely unlikely. He's a most peculiar old chap, mad of course, who owns one of the finest black and white timbered houses in England. He inherited it from a cousin, and though I believe he's absolutely rolling he lives like a pauper. So, a niece of his has arrived! It's the first time I've ever heard of any one staying at the Lake House. What's she like? I'm sorry for her."

"An interesting-looking girl and a lady. Very fair, and quiet in manner. She's a governess, and now she's having a holiday."

"Lor! What a place to spend a holiday in," laughed Carlton.

"Let us form a conspiracy to make it a pleasant one for her," suggested Mrs. Davenant.

Major Carlton looked incredulous. "Why! you don't know what old Thorpe is," he exclaimed, "he won't allow any of us to cross his threshold. We've all had notice to keep our distance. Not that any of us want to beard the old idiot in his den, but when he first went into residence we offered him the usual neighborly attentions. He accepted those civilly enough, then there came a sudden change in his attitude. I did hear he had some sort of illness; anyway he changed utterly, and all of a sudden, and now he's never seen or heard of, and his door's closed to all and sundry."

Mrs. Davenant was listening very attentively, her deep blue eyes fixed on the speaker.

"That's all very interesting and very mysterious," she said. "One would like to fathom the reason for the sudden change, for, of course, there is a reason."

"The only reason is that Thorpe's a mad old ass," commented Carlton a trifle impatiently.

"Forgive my saying that shows rather a lack of imagination on your part, Major Carlton. However, what you've told me only confirms my determination to dig out Miss Thorne. Her uncle can't prevent her from crossing this threshold. I shall write to her to-night and ask her to lunch. Perhaps Mr. Thorpe will leave her all his money and she'll end a great heiress."

Carlton was listening with a sort of unwilling admiration. He liked her interest in the poor little governess, but old Thorpe as a subject of conversation bored him. He shook his head.

"There's an heir already on which the place is entailed. I've not seen him, but I've heard of him in the neighborhood. A man somewhere between twenty-five and thirty, unmarried, an engineer by profession, and a Thorpe by name. You're right about my not being an imaginative chap, that isn't my line, but you'll be able to exercise any imagination you've got, for you'll hear the wildest rumors about the Lake House. It's got a splendid Christmas number reputation for being alive with ghosts. Half the folk here would refuse to set foot within its gates, the other half are simply aching to begin investigations, but old Thorpe can be trusted to keep them all at bay."

"I know which side I'll join," Mrs. Davenant told him, and her eyes had a dancing sparkle. "I'm for investigation. Meanwhile I'll write to the girl, and find out if she's had any weird experiences. Now do tell me of the other neighbors."

"We are your nearest and I hope we'll see lots of you, Mrs. Davenant. Don't let's stand on ceremony, there's nothing stiff about us, and I hope you'll look in as often as you can. My mother's a busy woman, but she's never very far away from the stables, and she's nearly always in to tea. It'll cheer her up to see you. Then there's Parson Warburton, a rattling good chap, whose sister lives with him at the vicarage, and there's the Halls, he's Master. You ride, of course?"

"No," confessed Mrs. Davenant, "not now, but I'll keep a mount in the stables for any friend."

"That's right. Nothing like encouraging local sport. Hall's a first-rate Master, and Mrs. Hall's not to be despised across country, hard as nails and any amount of pluck. They're a young couple with a brace of kids. She's an American with a pile made out of linseed, and she's very good to Jim."

Mrs. Davenant's butler at that moment opened the door and announced "Captain and Mrs. Hall."

Carlton rose to his feet with a laugh. "By Jove, talk of angels and they're sure to appear. You're going to have the whole county down on you."

Mrs. Davenant glanced over her shoulder at him with one of her flashing smiles. It was her gaiety that up to now had impressed him most.

"The more the merrier. How do you do, Mrs. Hall. Major Carlton was just telling me what a flyer you are across country."

"The Master's wife's got to have a look-in somewhere, or she'll find herself nowhere," retorted Mrs. Hall practically, "besides, I've had to keep the pack together more or less whilst he was soldiering."

"Hullo, Jim!" "Hullo, Claudie!" remarked the two men, smiling broadly at one another, each vastly comforted by the presence of the other.

Saidie Hall seated herself beside Mrs. Davenant, crossed her exquisite little feet, and her white-gloved hands over a jeweled lorgnette, and opened huge black eyes upon her companion. She had not been born good looking, but she had achieved good looks.

"I've just been perishing to see you, Mrs. Davenant. I've heard so much about you."

"I shan't reply with the obvious," laughed Hilda. "I think it kind of you to come and see me so soon. That's how I feel about it. Isn't paying calls in the

country different to calling in London? There, the dread is that the lady'll be at home. Here, the dread is she'll be out."

"That's only because in town there are so many tea shops," retorted Saidie Hall briskly. "At Terlingham, that's our place, every one who calls is offered tea whether I'm out or in. The country's a very fatiguing place to live in."

"I should have said the reverse," smiled Mrs. Davenant. "I've come here to rest. I'm tired of town and its rush."

Mrs. Hall looked astonished. "Why," she cried, "what happens directly I come back to Terlingham after a holiday abroad or in town? Constant streams of visitors, from the vicar to the village blacksmith, and all wanting something. Teas, treats, clothing, subscriptions, giving prizes, opening bazaars, mothers' meetings and local clubs. My life here is one long sacrifice."

"Come, now, and have some tea. We have it in the morning-room. I love to sit round tea of the nursery order, don't you?" laughed Mrs. Davenant. "Will you lead the way you know so well?" she added, turning to Mrs. Carlton.

"By Jove! how ripping the old place looks! I haven't been in it for years," said Captain Hall, who had manoeuvred himself into a seat next his hostess. "I'm not sure I don't prefer it to Great Glentworth. A big house isn't all beer and skittles, even if you have got lots of the needful to keep it up."

Hall was a neat, small man, built like a jockey; clean shaven and in feature almost effeminate, but there was nothing feminine in his nature. He glanced round approvingly at the faded rep curtains, the old

dumb waiters and the sideboard, on whose shining mahogany Georgian silver shone. He considered Saidie's taste was much too French. She had packed several lumber rooms with all the grand old wine coolers and clawlegged tables she could collect, and substituted what he called "spindle-legged foreign trash." Now he looked enviously at the dark red walls clothed with the old-fashioned flock paper, at the few old family portraits shining out of heavy carved frames, and the tea table with its bright-colored Crown Derby and dainty edibles. All contributed to touch him with many subtle associations, and Mrs. Davenant herself seemed to fit the period. She might have stepped out of a Romney portrait, in her soft white chiffon frock, belted with blue, the blush roses at her breast, and the richly piled dark brown hair framing her delicately tinted face.

"A real beauty and no mistake," thought the captain. Aloud he said, "The old squire used to call this the Red Parlor. Lady Alicia—she was his wife—used to sit in it. I can see her now, though I was a mere kid at the time, seated by the window sewing. She's been dead for the last twenty-five years at least. Do you play bridge, Mrs. Davenant?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't, but Miss Howard does. You may rope her in if you like. The fact is, Captain Hall, I don't do anything."

"You seem to do nothing jolly well. I suppose we are rather a busy lot hereabouts. Anyway we were busy before the war, and we're beginning to be busy again, I'm glad to say. When hunting's off there'll be a bit of season to get through. My wife enjoys her theaters and dances. Then there's the shooting and the cubbing season on before one's time to turn round.

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I believe in lots of work; keeps a man fit, don't you think? Carlton's a busy chap, too, always about when he's on leave. Great Glentworth takes a bit of looking after."

Miss Howard was pouring out tea at the other end of the table, and the rest of the party were chattering together very vigorously. Under cover of their conversation Mrs. Davenant lowered her voice and leaned towards her companion.

"I rather wonder Major Carlton let Little Glentworth. It's the Dower House, isn't it? Why, it might be needed any day."

Captain Hall thought a moment. He had not caught the drift of the remark.

"Oh! I twig now. Why, of course. I hadn't thought of that, but Claudie don't seem in any hurry to make up his mind."

"Falling in love isn't making up your mind, it's having your mind made up for you, Captain Hall."

The Master again pondered this proposition. "By Jove! I believe you're right. What a clever lady you are!" he conceded admiringly, and involuntarily he glanced at his wife with a broad smile. "Takes you all of a heap, you mean?"

"If you like to put it that way. I think falling in love's the best occupation there is for both women and men. As a matter of fact if we want to develop the best in us, we ought always to be in love with some one. Love is so progressive, so educative."

The Captain opened his blue eyes, and instinctively there shot into them a question he had almost forgotten how to ask since he married his Saidie and went to the war. Formerly he had not troubled to be sure of his ground. If knocked down he knew how to get up again.

Now he was more wary. Was it possible that Mrs. Davenant was out for adventure? He met her dancing eyes; then he knew where he stood. "Straight as a die. Right as rain," was his swift conclusion.

"I'm with you. Yes, rather! Keeps us out of mischief. Yet falling in love is sometimes rather dangerous," he ended with a reversion to caution.

"All fascinating pursuits are dangerous. They wouldn't be fascinating if they weren't," retorted Mrs. Davenant.

As the Master met her eyes, he felt in sudden need of assistance.

"Hear that, old chap?" he exclaimed, turning to Carlton, who had fallen into silence beside Mrs. Hall. "Mrs. Davenant thinks the best occupation for us is falling in love."

"You're out of the running, Jim," chaffed Claude with his slow smile.

"Captain Hall has localized my remark. I spoke in generalities," she retorted. "Love's a joy we're all the better for. It's a poor life that's lived without it. That's what I tried to infer."

"You seem to have hit on a rather intimate sort of topic," suggested Saidie whimsically.

"Love is the commonest topic, bar one, in the world," retorted Mrs. Davenant coolly, as she took a cigarette from the box in front of her.

"And what is the commonest topic of all?" asked Saidie.

"Hate! Do you smoke, Mrs. Hall? Pass round the box, please, Major Carlton, and don't think me ridiculously old-fashioned."

"I think there's much less falling in love now than there was in my young days. Men have grown so

selfish," said Mrs. Carlton, hunting one capacious pocket after another for cigarettes and matches.

Mrs. Davenant shook her head gently, as she rose. Her smile was almost regretful, and her shining eyes looked dreamy and full of reminiscence.

"I simply adore men," she said.

"That was my grandfather." Claude felt compelled to throw into the pool of silence something blatantly unemotional. It was not what he wanted to say, but it was the first idiotic remark that floated through his brain. He turned his back upon every one. He felt a shyness he could not understand and pointed to a portrait of a man of about twenty-five, clad in a jockey's dress and about to mount a sleek and well-bred horse. His hand was on the reins, but his face was turned round to the spectators as though giving some final order before he set out.

Mrs. Davenant stood by Carlton's side, and looked up at the picture. She seemed to speak quite mechanically.

"I love those old-fashioned portraits of squires with their favorite mounts."

"That was his famous mare that won so many steeplechases. She realized four thousand pounds in stakes in one year, though she cost my grandfather thrice that sum in lost wagers. He backed her against anything. She was a clinker, and though, as you see, she'd one white stocking which was thought a blemish, he'd never allow she wasn't perfect. She'd a box and paddock to herself, and a couple of grooms to wait on her, and during one very hard winter he had a straw-yard roofed in for her, so that she might exercise under cover."

"She broke his neck for him. However, it's the

death he would have chosen," remarked Mrs. Carlton grimly. "Do you use the room we call the Squire's den? It's hardly suitable for a woman."

Mrs. Davenant walked to the end of the room and threw open a door; Carlton followed her.

It was a cosy little den, decorated after the family fashion with portraits of horse and hound, the possession of which had at various periods dignified the Carlton race. Stuffed fish of portentous size that had fallen victims to rod and landing net decorated the walls. The bell ropes were foxes' brushes, and on the mantelshelf was a mighty drinking horn with silver rim, the contents of which Carlton's ancestors had been wont to empty at a draught before being helped to bed. The window looked out on a fine old stone court. Perhaps it was of all the rooms in the house the one most redolent of the family fragrance, and when Claude walked in a crowd of memories rushed forth to greet him, memories which although hardly hallowed had a certain impressiveness. All those jolly sportsmen, dicers and drinkers, that he had so often heard of had been his kith and kin, and were now dead, though their memories seemed ever green.

"It was in this room I smoked my first cigarette," he said, with a slow smile of recollection. "Lor! how ill I was after! And one of my earliest interests was in that old print of the prize fight. That old boy is Old Q. at ninety years of age. I'd like to take just a turn round the garden if it won't bore you too much. I've got such ripping recollections of the gardens here. In summer and autumn there was always a jolly scent of thyme and old-fashioned flowers; a fine old English aroma of sweet smells, and a bee hum and murmur from morning to night in the lime walks leading to

the river. Do you keep this door locked?" He pointed to a heavy curtain.

"On the inside." She was listening to him in a curious meditative melancholy; her voice was almost somber, but she slipped behind the curtain and in another moment they stood outside together.

"I say! Don't you want a hat or something?"

Her gay air returned suddenly.

"Not I. Let us stroll down the lime walk and listen to the bees humming."

At first their conversation consisted of inevitable commonplaces, but he was receiving new impressions of her which had nothing to do with what they said.

The sun blinds had been down outside the rooms they had been in, and he had not noted that her skin was free from the least trace of cosmetics, yet it had the fresh and delicate tints of a girl's complexion. Her dress also, now that he saw it in the full sunset splendor flaming in the west, roused in him a new train of thoughts, that in the last few years he had almost forgotten. Small details in it for which he had no name, brought whiffs of Monte Carlo and Nice, casinos and moonlit terraces.

But such thoughts were blent with others of a different order. There was something tragic in her face. A shadow seemed always to lie under the surface of her gay light-heartedness, and the expression of her eyes was sometimes somber even when her lips smiled.

"I'm glad you wished to come out into this heaven-born evening," she said. "I think I was beginning to feel a little shy."

He glanced quickly round at her with a trace of astonishment.

"That is the last failing I should have accused you of. You appear to me to be a perfect woman of the world."

There was a little sparkle between her eyelashes as she answered in her sunny voice.

"Not of your world, Major Carlton. I am shy of country life just as I am shy of church."

"But not, I trust, of me?" he retorted quickly, watching her down-dropped head.

"No, but then you are different. I'm at home with you, because you've known lives somewhat similar to mine. Men's lives."

Her face grew full of memories, the fibers of her nature seemed unstrung. He watched her puzzled and fascinated. What did she mean? He hardly knew what to make of her.

"I'm glad we've got something in common," he said rather gravely, "though I don't know that men's lives, even the best of them, are up to much. I fear you place us on too high a pedestal. More is always expected of women than of men."

He was thinking now of her words "I adore men." He saw her shoulders shrug.

"Oh! not now so much as formerly. Men are fairer now to women. They do begin to acknowledge that human nature is similar in both sexes. You do permit us to own up to the same passions with which you are liberally endowed."

Their eyes met and he was conscious of an undefined intimacy. They fell to a sudden silence as they strolled together with slow paces, their feet rustling amongst the brown leaves of the previous year.

It was a day when the beauty of nature made itself felt like tender music that yet had no sound. The air

was warm and fragrant, and of ethereal clearness which draped the landscape in the softness of velvet. The old grassy street through which they walked was arched by giant limes, and beneath their emerald arches shot slanting sunbeams. At the end of the green alley, flashing in the sheen of sunset, flowed the river, but even as they walked, like the sigh of a spirit, swept from out the west the first intimation of waning light, of the mysteries of coming darkness.

"Listen to the humming of the bees."

They both stood still and listened to the wonderful volume of sound, like a grand rhythm of praise rising up to the illuminated heavens.

"Isn't it ripping to be away from all the infernal botherations of ordinary life?" he asked involuntarily.

She looked at him in silence. She wondered how he contrived when he chose to drop ordinary life by the wayside. She had found it impossible to do so.

"I shan't forget this evening in the lime walk." His voice dropped almost to softness as he quoted:

"It may be it shall please you to remember
Those silver stems, this shadowy woodland way.
To think upon one sun-perfumed September
Perchance—some day."

"Do you know the lines? They are Watson's. The British army discovered poetry in 1914."

She kept her eyes upon his face. Everything else seemed to have stopped except the action and influence of two souls, one upon the other.

"And this is what I was thinking," she almost whispered:

"And in that forest synagogue
Whose aisles are paved with bloom and sod,
A broken heart may haply find
The tenderness of God."

He withdrew his eyes from hers and stared straight before him, as if he had not heard her. A little frown had gathered on his brow, and he felt unaccountably stirred. He had learned to love poetry for its own sake, not for the emotions it could arouse. He was not given to feeling emotional. He hated the word, and thought he despised such feelings. A vague irritation stirred him.

"Come! I must be returning," he said, glancing at his watch. "It's getting late."

From the distance came the faint sounds of voices and happy laughter.

"Yes," she echoed, "it is getting late."

They turned with one accord. As they retraced their footsteps they were silent. "It is getting late." The simple words took on another significance in Claude's mind.

Was he letting time run on and life slip away from him before he had realized what it held? Her words assumed a warning. It was getting late. Soon it might be too late. His thirtieth birthday was an hour in the past.

"Come along, Claudie. We must be getting back. The roans have got the fidgets and are digging graves in the gravel."

Mrs. Carlton with her single eyeglass firmly fixed, and her Homburg hat cocked at the correct angle, stood by her horses. She shook hands genially with her hostess and gathered up the ribbons preparatory to mounting the high mail phaeton.

"Hope to see you soon at our place, Mrs. Davenant. So long, Jim, we meet to-morrow for a day in the stubbles," she called out from aloft, giving a loose rein to the roans who were poised on their hind legs

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ready to spring forward. The gravel sputtered in showers, another moment and the carriage had disappeared, only the fast even trot of the roans racing home to their evening feed was borne back to the onlookers.

CHAPTER IV

SUSPICION

MRS. DAVENANT'S simple avowal of her adoration of men produced a strong and lasting effect upon her select little audience. Indeed, it may be said to have supplied the keynote to the county's understanding of her individuality. Such remarks have a way of their own in spreading broadcast. This particular remark was like a pebble dropped in a pool. It sunk to hard bottom and sent out ripples towards the shores where crouch the harpies who batten on human wreckage. Those three simple little words became the pivot round which swung public opinion.

As the Carltons drove home they were at first very silent, both minds engrossed with the same conundrum.

"What did those words mean?" Mrs. Carlton asked herself. What did they portend? They seemed to stand out in letters of fire and obliterate all other impressions. Was it merely a silly pose, or a throwing down the gauntlet of defiance in the face of the county, or again was it nothing more than the innocent admission of a very simple woman?

Mrs. Carlton reflectively stroked the backs of the roans with her whip, then she shot a sidelong glance at her son, who appeared to have fallen into a brown study. Was Mabel Tadcaster right? Was Mrs.

Davenant very attractive to men? Undoubtedly! Conviction clutched at Mrs. Carlton's heart. What better means to emphasize her attractiveness could she have taken than in uttering those words, "I adore men," and of course it was a stock phrase she used universally.

Certainly myriads of women adored men. Why shouldn't they? But they didn't say it. Or, here lay the core of the matter, if they did say it they didn't look like that when they said it.

Mrs. Carlton rather irritably flicked off a fly from the near roan's back, and the "thanks awfully" of the pair roused Claude.

"Rather jolly women, don't you think? I like 'em both."

The mother detected just the faintest tinge of anxiety in her son's voice. She hastened to allay it.

"Yes, so do I, immensely. They're a decided acquisition to the neighborhood, and how good-looking they both are."

Now there was distinct relief in Claude's happy little laugh.

"By Jove! aren't they, and so well turned out. I like to see a woman very simply dressed in the country, and I like Mrs. Davenant particularly. She's so simple in herself."

Mrs. Carlton winked her off eye and let her monocle drop.

"Yes! isn't she, perfectly simple. Refreshing, isn't it? That little remark about adoring men was delicious. Why shouldn't she adore men? I've always loved 'em. We'll agree on that point, anyway."

Captain and Mrs. Hall did not discuss the situation on the way home, for the simple reason that the Master

insisted on driving his own car, a thing he very rarely did, having a profound contempt for man-made modes of locomotion. Saidie never drove in anything that had not a limousine top. The weather was never right for an open car. The sun was either too hot and the dust too thick, or the wind was too cold and the mud too liquid. She never permitted herself to be blown about in any other attire than in strictly orthodox riding kit, which so transformed her naturally elaborate appearance that she constantly escaped recognition. Indeed, she was generally known in the field by the horses she rode.

"That's the Master's high-flyer. Mrs. Hall must be up," was a common enough remark heard at cover-side.

At dinner Captain Hall was well aware that Mrs. Davenant would be "threshed out," and he appeared at the table in a very cheerful and conciliatory mood.

"Well, Saidie! What's your paddock final on the ladies at Little Glentworth?" he inquired, dashing at once into the thick of things.

"What's yours?" retorted his wife pertly.

Jim was in no way disconcerted. "Oh! I fancy they're all right so far as one can judge, but a woman understands those sort of things better than a man, I always think."

His voice was careless and slightly patronizing, and he did not specify what "those sort of things" were. He left that to the imagination.

"Did you notice her pearls? They were real, and if there was one there were fifty; only half the rope showed, the rest was tucked inside her gown."

"Pearls! Whose pearls?" inquired the Master, raising his boyish, innocent face.

"Mrs. Davenant's, of course. I can't quite get to rock bottom of her. Is she very deep or very shallow?"

Jim Hall knew perfectly what was in his wife's mind. Those three little words, "I adore men." Well! no doubt the compliment was returned with compound interest. She was a stunning beauty and a rattling good sort. He was sorry she didn't ride. There were so many little opportunities of being civil to women in the field, in which a Master could indulge with perfect circumspection. However, there might be other opportunities.

"Rather soon to form any definite conclusions on that point," he answered airily. "Miss Howard's a fine specimen of a 'has been.' Wonder why she never married."

"I wonder why Mrs. Davenant never re-married."

"Once bitten, twice shy," observed Jim foolishly.

"That proverb never applied to any living soul over ten years old," retorted Saidie with conviction. "When a woman's made a bad shot she always wants to recover her losses. It's like playing at Monte. You know how we always try to get back. If I make a good shot I always want to double it. Another thing, women are getting so much like men, nowadays. They like variety."

"Oh! my dear!" expostulated the Master.

Saidie laughed wickedly. "Well! don't men take what they like? No, there's some other reason why Mrs. Davenant remains a widow. When a man doesn't marry it's because he's waiting for some other man to die, and when a woman doesn't marry it's because she's waiting for some other woman to snuff. It doesn't always come off, of course. It's a pure gamble."

"To which time has much to say," put in the Master jauntily.

"Oh, no, my dear. Age is merely a question of mental outlook," his wife assured him, "and really if a woman makes a mistake in her second husband she doesn't deserve to have lost her first."

Thinking the matter over in bed that night, Jim came to the conclusion that Saidie had been very non-committal over the ladies of Little Glentworth. He was hanged if he knew what she thought of them, but he made up his mind he'd call in on his way home from shooting on the morrow, and offer his services to Mrs. Davenant over the matter of hunters. Poor things, they had no man in the house, and it would be neighborly to do what he could. He had picked up one or two quite decent mounts since his return.

When Hilda Davenant and Agnes Howard found themselves once more alone that evening, a change crept over them both. That flashing smile, that gay air of content vanished, and the lovely face of Mrs. Davenant grew almost somber.

The sunset hour was passed, and the fading light in the shadowy room seemed to reflect its pale melancholy on her thoughtful features. It was very quiet, the world seemed already to fold its hands in slumber. It was the hour which brought to Hilda Davenant revolt, not peace.

"Nice people, nice kindly disposed people," she soliloquized, and her low voice was a little tremulous. "What a type apart they are, those country-bred folk with generations of fine tradition behind them. They are really the only gentle-people left in England, and they'll die hard. The war has simply passed over their heads."

Miss Howard was lighting a cigarette. She looked curiously at the idle attitude of her companion, half reclining on the sofa, her hands clasped behind her head.

"Don't forget that they and their retainers poured out their blood like water in the war," she demurred. "Isn't it natural that they desire to revert to 1914? I always felt sure they would. We were told there would be an end to men-servants. All that survive are back again in their old places. There were to be no more men selling ribbons and laces. Every shop swarms with them again, and never were there so many motor-cars on the roads. Britain's one desire is to forget the war, to jazz it out of their minds and revert to pre-war conditions. Personally I think they are wise. There's a deal of wisdom in the saying, 'Let's eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow we die.' Those who condemn it are those who can't follow it."

Hilda seemed to be following the bent of her own thoughts rather than listening to her companion.

"What wonderful revelations there are in a woman's face! Life writes its biography there, and every face is a history in the making. The open street is a gallery telling the history of the noble and the mean, the sad and the joyous. What a smart, good-looking woman Mrs. Carlton is. A regular masher!"

"Just what she isn't, my dear," retorted Miss Howard. "That get-up is only a signboard marked 'No road this way.' Once she must have been a wonderfully pretty woman. When she was widowed I guess she adopted that dress to save trouble. She didn't want to marry again. She had her precious only son."

Hilda gravely considered the subject for a moment.

"The interesting point about masculine women is that it's impossible to imagine they ever were young. Effeminate men never seem to age."

Agnes laughed. "Yet Mrs. Carlton was once young and was made love to. She's actually given birth to a male child."

Hilda looked round. Her face was quite serious and deeply interested.

"It does seem preposterous, almost indecent, and what a blessing the boy wasn't a girl. Now I could imagine her laying an egg, as is the independent habit of some mateless fowls. But a son! and such a son! I'm sure her first question was 'colt or filly, doctor?'"

"How can you be so flippant," expostulated Miss Howard. "So you do admire the son?"

"I admire them both immensely. If there was such a thing, which there isn't, I'd say he was a thoroughly English type, whose entire character rests on the noiseless conviction that he's a man and a gentleman."

"A sort of John Bull?"

Hilda shook her head. "No, J. B. belongs to the lower middle classes. He's a son of the soil. Major Carlton is very much Lord of the Manor, and he actually quoted poetry to me which wasn't Kipling. If I were writing a novel I'd make him fall madly in love with the beautiful mysterious widow. I'd love him passionately, divinely, and utterly blast his career by producing a husband who for years has been confined in a mad-house. I've often thought I'd write a novel on my own life, not that there would be much novelty in it except it's truth."

"You'd be quite safe. No one would believe it."

"No," replied Hilda gravely. "You've got to im-

agine something quite inhuman if you want the critics to cry 'How true to life.' As if anything was ever true to life! Life's as divergent as the human face,—out of countless millions, no two alike. Have you run across the parson yet?"

"The parson!" echoed Agnes in a bewildered tone.

Hilda waved an impatient hand. "Yes! the parson. How could there not be a parson in a scene like this? Why, he's as necessary to the picture as the village pond, and the ducks in the middle that stand on their heads, and the geese who are always so rude to strangers. I shall cultivate the parson."

"Perhaps he won't be cultivated," suggested Agnes.

"That won't matter or alter my determination. The very word cultivate means taking trouble and strict attention to detail. What's he like?"

"One whom it would pay to cultivate. A splendid variety, Hilda, but don't overdo it."

"My dear, if one means to do a thing then either do it thoroughly or leave it alone. By the way, where is that silver-bound prayer-book of mine, with the long chain that hangs on the arm? I shall use it every Sunday. I wonder if Major Carlton and the Master go to church and pray into their hats in the good old-fashioned way. I liked both these men. They're the clean-bred country type that has a real standard to live by. I sometimes think it's really rather wonderful how we get on so well in our manless existence."

"We get on all right without men because we've got to," retorted Agnes dogmatically.

"I fail to see the necessity." Mrs. Davenant's voice was dry. "We are really a triumph of art over nature, but sometimes I think we're rather foolish not to take

some of the very tempting things that come along. Other women would."

"Granted. We may be foolish to have no entanglements, but remember it means freedom. It's better to live alone than in company with some solid facts I could mention. What a woman of moods you are. You were so gay and alluring this afternoon, and now you are so inconsistent."

Mrs. Davenant shrugged. "Only the dead are consistent, and when one is either very happy, very miserable, or deeply in love, one has to be superlatively silly. I'm in that sort of humor that I could fall in love in a station waiting-room."

Miss Howard was accustomed to Hilda's whimsies. "You're old enough to know better," she laughed.

"Women are never any age till they cease to matter," she retorted, "and that's what nursemaids say to three-year-old urchins who have got well astride a mud pie. I daresay I'm silly, but I'd rather be a foolish widow than a wise virgin, any day. I'd like the evening post to bring me a letter beginning, 'Dearest woman in the world.'"

"I should have thought that by now your appetite for such epistles would have become somewhat jaded," retorted Agnes drily.

Mrs. Davenant jumped up and walked to the window, then she looked round.

"You thought nothing of the sort, my dear, because you know as well as I do that there's no sound so enchanting as the crackle of a love letter inside your corsets. You know that to every right-minded woman a love letter is the best pick-me-up invented. It raises one's soul above even such sordid details as bills and the water rate. If I was Postmaster-General I'd

institute a sacred delivery for love letters, and dress the postman like Cupid, with wings."

"What would you do in a frost, Hilda?"

"The supreme letter writer is the lover," continued Mrs. Davenant, scornful of the interruption.

"I've often heard that the most wonderful letters are written in lunatic asylums," persisted Agnes.

"That's because the really sane people only are shut up. We who are at large are all mad on some things, and most of us on most things. Ah! how lovely it would be if I had a dearly beloved whom I knew was thinking of me and loving me from day to day. How heavenly to look forward to those hours when my lips would say all that my pen failed to express."

"Do you feel lonely, Hilda?"

Mrs. Davenant shook her head emphatically. "No, I've never felt lonely because I've dared to live. I happen to be dead at present, but if ever I do feel lonely, why, I shall come to life again and begin to live afresh."

"It's getting late for such adventures," observed Miss Howard drily.

"It's getting late," echoed Hilda very gently, with reminiscence in her eyes; then she flung out suddenly and impatiently. "Oh! women might really have a much better time if they weren't so wedded to lost opportunities."

"And lost causes and half-forlorn hopes," put in Agnes quietly. "You said some little time ago that you'd finished with men, and that marriage was really throwing up the sponge and crying Peccavi."

"Ah! that was in a fit of boredom over Tristram, or was it Fielding, I really forget. What I'm sure I

meant was that there is no bargaining with love. If a man isn't everything to a woman, then he's nothing. That's where I'm so handicapped. I dare not take everything which would include marriage."

Agnes smiled rather bitterly. "Marriage is so constantly a prison to a man and a workhouse to a woman. She never really knows what work means till she marries."

"Let's go for a stroll," suggested Hilda. "You're in one of your 'love is a mere matter of liver' moods. Let us tramp it off."

CHAPTER V

THE NAMELESS FEAR

“QUEER sort of old place, ain’t it, miss?”

Letty Thorne started, and turned round nervously at the sound of a human voice in the silent wood. All she saw was the old gnome-like gardener eating his dinner on a log of felled timber.

“Yes, it’s a curious old place, but it might be very beautiful if it was properly kept up, and not allowed to fall into decay.”

The gnome nodded. “Most folks think the same. I’ve knowed it man and boy for fifty years, and my father knowed it longer before me, but he’s gone and the old house is going after him.”

“You mean it’s dropping to pieces from neglect.”

The gnome wiped his clasp knife on his knee meditatively.

“Aye, the house is going, and the famby’s going. They’re wore out. I’ve seen three squires and none of them bided long. There was Mr. Marmaduke Thorpe. Then came his son, Mark. A rare wild one he was, but as fine a man to look at as ever stepped, and now there’s this one, Mr. Geoffrey Thorpe. A famby’s always on its last legs when it gets next heirs in distant cousins. There’s but one left after squire, and he’s single. Beggin’ your pardon, I knows you’re

squire's niece, but you're only a woman, ye see, and squire, he won't last long. He's never been the same man since the fit he had."

"I didn't know he ever had a fit. When was it?" inquired Letty suppressing an inclination to laugh at the gnome's reflections.

"Oh! it must be nigh on seven years now, miss. He'd been out to dinner, and he's never been out to dinner since. He rose from his bed a changed man, and wouldn't have any one nigh him but Mrs. Greatrex. There must have been something queer happen. Maybe he saw the ghost, any way he was a changed man."

"Have you ever seen the ghost?" inquired Letty, unconsciously dropping her voice.

"No, miss. I've seen nothing worse than myself, but I'm not going to go the length of saying there's nothing to see. Ghost or no ghost, there's summat wrong, summat not quite right about the Lake House. Maybe what I've not seen 'as been made up by what I've 'eard."

Letty shivered. She had a sudden disinclination to pursue the subject.

"It must be kind of lonely for you 'ere, miss, with nothing to talk to but Mrs. Greatrex. She ain't got so much conversation as Balaam's ass. Saving Mr. 'Arry Thorpe, there's not a livin' soul ever sets foot in the Lake House, and 'e don't come very often. They do say at the White Hart 'e's expected shortly."

"Oh, I manage to get on all right," replied Letty hastily, unconscious of a brilliant blush, "but of course it is lonely."

Then she nodded pleasantly and walked on.

The old man stared after her. "A thrush down the chimley this morning, which means a death," he

muttered, nodding his head in a satisfied manner; then he seated himself on the felled trunk. For a few moments the delightful anticipations uppermost in Letty's mind were quenched in mental pictures of that night, seven years ago, when the strong man was stricken down suddenly, and his strength taken from him forever. It was not strange that she had heard nothing of this before. Evidently Miss Fanny Thorpe had not known of it, and who would be likely to speak of it in that dumb house, where the very sound of her own voice was beginning to strike the girl with a spectral strangeness?

She had discovered nothing concerning the ghost that was said to haunt the place. Yet in these first long days of her residence in the Lake House there had arisen, by degrees out of her solitude, a senseless dread of something to which she could give no name.

It was a dread that followed her like a shadow through the passages, that hovered in the dark corners of the room, at night. Yet she could not explain, even to herself, what it was she feared. She knew that nervous fancies are apt to grow up in the brains of those who live in solitude, and she could detect in her uncle many evidences of secret troubles or weird hallucinations, but she had only dwelt a week under his roof, and it was early days for the demons of isolation to fasten on her.

The reasoning powers with which she was liberally endowed forced her to confess that this shadow which haunted her had nothing in common with superstitious fears. Something hateful which impregnated the atmosphere roused an intangible back current of thought, and the grim forbidding silence of the woman

in the kitchen mingled significantly with it like a constant accompaniment. Not only at night, but in broad daylight her footsteps were dogged by some shadowy terror of a thing unseen but present, and it compelled her when walking about the house, or in the woods, to turn every now and then and stare behind her. In short it was the presence of something she could not understand, and having reasoned the matter out thus far it remained all she knew concerning it.

She found her position a very strange one. She went and came as she chose. No one asked her where she had been or where she was going. No one consulted her convenience or opinion. She did as she pleased, and Sarah Greatrex ruled supreme.

She had no idea how Geoffrey Thorpe spent his time. To her cheerful "Good morning," he responded with a curt nod, usually directed towards the table, and very rarely he would echo her salutation, and that was the extent of their daily intercourse. All her efforts towards natural conversation were thwarted by indomitable silence.

Her one joy in the day was the walk to the village post office, where she found a letter awaiting her. But for the comfort and solace of that daily gift of love, she would have found it very hard to remain amid such desolate surroundings.

It touched her to see how the old post-mistress offered her a welcome, and encouraged her to sit down and rest awhile, and how the villagers coming in and out of the shop saluted her with a quiet sympathy in their attitude.

It was quite clear to Letty that everybody in the neighborhood regarded her as an object for sincere pity, but no one ever mentioned the reason for this pity

in her hearing, and her sense of loyalty to her uncle kept her silent on the subject of her loneliness.

That evening, as she reëntered the house the words of the old gardener recurred to her, and taking up her work she quietly seated herself by the window in the chair she had adopted on her arrival.

Cautiously she watched her uncle, taking care that he should not become aware of her doing so. As usual he had not raised his eyes when she entered. He sat by the table, his papers littered in front of him. A pen was in his hand, but he did not use it. His back was towards the portrait and when anything startled him, and the slightest noise had that effect, he glanced swiftly back over his shoulder at it. The trick puzzled and fascinated Letty Thorne, for when in the room she sensed in herself a strong impulse to do likewise. Purposely she seated herself where the portrait was not visible to her, but she never lost the consciousness of its dominating presence.

The door opened suddenly, and the old man started violently and repeated the habit, yet it was only Mrs. Greatrex who entered.

She walked up to the mantelshelf where a purse lay, took out some silver and said, "for the gardener." As Letty lifted her eyes she met those of Sarah full. Her expression was strangely malignant, and it came to Letty that her smallest action was known to this strange, silent woman.

The hours passed as usual, in silence. The silver dusk began to fall over fields and woodlands, and the owls and bats stole forth on silent wing. A more profound silence seemed to descend upon the old house with the sinking of the sun, and Geoffrey Thorpe sat motionless as if graven in stone. When the room was

veiled in darkness Sarah entered with the one lamp which she set upon the old man's table, and then came the simple supper of bread, cheese and beer. Letty had asked the housekeeper if she might have a lamp, and had been curtly told that there was not one available, so directly after supper she went to her room with the customary "good night," so rarely responded to.

To-night she thought again of the old gardener's words, "Maybe he saw the ghost."

Somehow, Letty associated the ghost with the long dark gallery outside her door. She pictured it passing by there, slipping silently downstairs, and from thence out into the coppice, where Geoffrey Thorpe might have encountered it in the ghost's walk, that night seven years ago.

Was it a male or female ghost? she wondered, then in half-fearful scorn at her own weakness she resolutely turned her mind from the haunting subject. She told herself that there was that in her life for which she had reason to be profoundly thankful. The future was really full of infinite joy and happiness, and at last, bathed in happy anticipation, she fell asleep.

Later on something happened which was to banish slumber.

It seemed to Letty Thorne as if she had been unconscious for but a few moments, when she was broad awake again, listening intently to footsteps in the long gallery outside her door. They were stealthy, soft steps, as if fearful of detection. Then came a sound like a hand being quickly passed backwards and forwards along the wall at the head of her bed, and a click which suggested a heavy key striking against a brass candlestick.

For fully five minutes poor Letty lay bathed in a

cold sweat of pure fear, and her heart beat suffocatingly. Then her strong common-sense came to her aid. She took herself in hand and smiled at her own childish fears. Had not Geoffrey Thorpe a right to walk about his own house? Was not Sarah Greatrex free to move about where and when she pleased?

Then, suddenly the clock in the village church tower struck two, and her fears leapt alive again. Instead of a few minutes she had been asleep for about three hours. Was it likely that the only two other occupants of the house would still be up? Even if they were what could they possibly be doing in the gallery at such an hour? Both Sarah and Mr. Thorpe occupied bedrooms in another part of the house. Letty had discovered that the gallery only led to her own room, and several of the others that were disused and shut up, and which were reached by a dark passage striking off at right angles from her door. The back of the house, looking on the flagged court and ghost walk beyond, was built in very irregular fashion, and there were several little winding staircases leading to rooms now crumbling to decay. She had considered the situation of the rooms lying beyond her own, and discovered that they must all necessarily look out on the copse where the ghost walk took its rise. Standing in the copse and looking back at the old house, she had noted that the windows of those rooms were all closed up, and apparently never opened, and several great trees had been allowed to extend their branches, blocking up the window panes and spreading over portions of the roof.

Two o'clock in the morning and alone, and life at the Lake House had not been calculated to strengthen her, so far, against such thoughts as now assailed her.

The shadows that lurked under the fine reasoning with which she strove to satisfy herself, gave the lie to their efficacy.

Unsolved mysteries drifted through her mind, and she halted on the threshold of problems that had never yet been elucidated, and to the consideration of which both the timid and the daring bring a certain awe.

At that hour she could not have truthfully affirmed a disbelief in the supernatural, though she might have done so in broad daylight.

If, she argued now to herself, no such appearances were possible, how was it that from the remotest ages of man the very air around had been endued with a subtle power to threaten the living with the dread presence of the dead? The fact of her uncle's sudden change from prodigality to penuriousness had now become invested with a tragic interest, and somehow its mysterious cause was connected with her present fears.

No further noise broke on her ear, save the scratching of a mouse in the wainscot, and the hooting of the numerous owls that built and reared their young unchecked through the years.

Counting the hours, Letty lay awake till a lovely dawn called to her to rise and shake off the nightmare dread of the Lake House.

CHAPTER VI

THE LOVERS

“OH! Harry, I’m so indescribably happy.” Letty raised her face from the tweed breast in which it had been buried.

“Let me see, darling, how it looks to be indescribably happy.”

Harry Thorpe took her face between his hands, smiled into her eyes, then kissed her very long and tenderly.

“Glad to see me, darling?” he asked in a hushed voice of utter contentment.

“Words can’t answer that question, Harry.”

“Lips can, Letty. No need for words.”

In a passion of love she surrendered herself to his embraces. Never had her lover been so dear to her, never had meeting been so precious to Letty as now, when her nerves were shaken and jarred by the previous night’s experience. Yet she dreaded speaking of those fears which, even in his presence, she could not wholly banish. Harry was nothing if not practical, he was so full of strong common sense that she felt heartily ashamed of her weakness. Added to which the Lake House would be, if all went well, their future home, and Letty was so alive to all its great possibilities as a delightful residence that she shrank from throwing upon it the smallest shadow. Harry loved it,

in spite of its gloom, for his imagination could readily picture what it might become under new ownership and she was intensely desirous of viewing the future through his eyes.

"If only last night could be blotted out," she thought miserably through her smiles. In one of his daily letters Harry had announced his coming, and had arranged the place of meeting by the lake, where stood a half-ruined summer house. It was a desolate enough spot to all but lovers, who are or ought to be impervious to their surroundings, but Harry knew they would be quite undisturbed there. He was perfectly well aware that the place was shunned by all the countryside, but under the present circumstances that was a distinct advantage, and he could have his White Rose all to himself without fear of interruption. He was as loth to speak to Letty of the mystery attached to the place as she was loth to mention it to him, and for similar reasons. He had known for some long time of the rumors, and that they were freely discussed in the village, but he treated them with a good-natured contempt, and attributed them to his kinsman's great eccentricities.

The sheet of water, still called the lake, was now nothing more than a large pond. The ghost walk led straight to it through the thick wood tangled with undergrowth. The weeds had encroached upon the water year by year, there were deep portions still, and the thickly-wooded edges were boggy and treacherous to walk upon, but the side on which the summer-house stood was high ground and perfectly dry.

With his arm about her they strolled along the edge of the water till they reached the dilapidated arbor, and seated there amidst crumbling wood, rank fungoid

growth, and blanketing moss. Letty looked out and thought how lovely it all was and how exquisite were the sky gleams of autumn sunshine that filtered through the branches and fell upon the water like golden javelins.

“How long can you stay, Harry?”

“I’ve only got a week, darling. I must set to work with a will, now I’m home. We’ll spend, however, every hour of it together that we can. Even if the old chap does discover how much we mean to each other I really don’t care a hang.”

Alarm leapt into Letty’s eyes. “Oh! but he mustn’t, Harry. You’ve no conception how he’d scoff and sneer at us. I couldn’t bear it.”

Harry hugged her closer to him. “He can’t part us, anyhow, and what would his sneers matter to us, sweetheart? Another year and I’ll have saved enough to make a nest for my beloved and we’ll be married and live happily forever after. I’m not one of those chaps who are content to wait for dead men’s shoes. I prefer my own energy, but I want you to love the Lake House, for if I survive Geoffrey Thorpe it will be our home, and we’d soon make it look very different to what it is now. It’s the people who live within the walls who make or mar the home. Now, tell me how you’re hitting it off with the old boy? Your letters are very non-committal.”

Letty raised a suddenly troubled face from the shoulder on which it rested.

“Oh! Harry, darling, I’m not hitting it off. There’s nothing to hit off. I might as well be the guest of a mummy that has been buried a thousand years. Both Mrs. Greatrex and Uncle are dumb creatures.”

Harry laughed. "Why? Is not the old boy communicative? He must surely talk sometimes. I know he's beastly crusty, and he loathes the sight of me because I'm his heir and he's powerless to disinherit me; and I've come through, but perhaps that's only natural. I'm coming to lunch to-day."

"To lunch, Harry?" Letty gasped. "You don't mean to say he's invited you? How thrilling!"

"No, I don't mean to go quite so far as that, darling," retorted Harry rather grimly. "I mean that I'm going to invite myself and see what happens. I'm not going to behave in any secret underhand manner. The Lake House is still his property, and it's only right that he should know of my arrival, so I'm coming back with you to lunch. I'm rather in a blue funk. He'll be in a deuce of a rage, but it'll be rather fun to see how he takes it."

"I'm not so sure that it'll be exactly fun, Harry. There's nothing in the least funny about Uncle Geoffrey."

"So you seem to think, darling, but I'm rather big for him to kick out, and I'm so happy to-day that I feel like bearding Beelzebub himself. Besides, it'll be a sort of satisfaction to get a rise out of that old hag, Sarah. If I live to inherit she'll go in double quick time."

"But if we go back together, Harry, Uncle will wonder how we met and there will have to be explanations," demurred Letty.

"Leave that to me, sweetheart. All you've got to do is to follow my lead. I must first of all see in what direction the wind blows."

"It's always in the bleak north here, Harry."

"Except at such moments as this."

He drew her close in tender sheltering arms. He noted her nervousness and longed to remove her from her uncongenial surroundings, but at present he was helpless, work as hard as he could.

"My beloved," he whispered, "you look like a white rose to-day. Come, cheer up, and don't be so scared over nothing. Give me a kiss before we walk straight into the lion's jaws."

As they neared the commencement of the Ghost's Walk leading out of the yard, they fell apart decorously and into silence. He opened the gate for her, then deliberately closed it and followed her into the house.

"Go straight into the lion's den," he whispered, "and don't forget I'm there to defend you."

With a brave exterior, but with nervous trepidation which made her heart beat thickly, Letty obeyed her lover.

The old man was seated in his usual chair, but his head was raised and his face, scared and blanched to the color of chalk, was turned defiantly to the door. He had heard the footsteps of a man accompanying his niece. Then, as Harry strode forward and seized his reluctant hand, his whole expression changed from abject fear to bitter sarcasm.

"Harry Thorpe! To what do I owe this unexpected honor?"

Harry, having warmly wrung the hand he had seized, let it drop.

"Oh! sir, you overwhelm me. I seek to confer no honor. Indeed, if you'll only believe it, I am the simplest chap going. I met Miss Thorpe when on my way to pay my respects to you, and naturally I guessed at once who she was. She's told me how

awfully kind your are to her and what a ripping time she's having and all that sort of thing, and knowing your hospitable nature I've come to ask for a bit of lunch."

"My niece did not invite you?"

The words dropped like ice from the old man's parched lips. He was literally being consumed by the fires of his own fury, and his eyes blazed from out their sunken sockets like those of a wild animal.

Harry had turned apparently quite at his ease and tossed his cap into a chair. Now he wheeled round again and his expression was smiling and guileless as that of a child.

"Invite me, sir! Why, no," he laughed reproachfully. "She knew I needed no invitation. Haven't you and I known each other for years and aren't we kinsmen? How jolly well you look, sir. Been enjoying this fine summer?"

Mr. Thorpe made no reply to the question. He was choking with rage, and his voice was husky and quivering.

"How long do you mean to stay?"

"Oh! I am in no hurry. The White Hart is most comfortable and every one's so jolly kind. It's really not such a bad world as some folk make out. Don't you find there really is a lot of kindness knocking about in unexpected places?"

Geoffrey Thorpe turned petulantly aside as Sarah Greatrex entered, and Letty, who was consumed with suppressed merriment when she looked at Harry, and with actual fear when she looked at her uncle's face distorted with rage, seized the opportunity to make her escape.

Mrs. Greatrex stalked aggressively forward, bris-

ting with anger, and scowling at the intruder from under her shaggy brows. She was about to speak when Harry forestalled her. He bowed flippantly.

"Morning! Ripping day, isn't it? The sort of day that makes you feel at peace with all the world, purifies the temper and kills the slugs. Mr. Thorpe has kindly asked me to stop to lunch, but I'd be vastly obliged if you'd draw me a tankard of ale straight away. I'm as thirsty as the Sahara. The bacon at the White Hart's as salt as Lot's wife. Or would you rather I saved you the trouble and drew it myself?"

He made a step towards the door, and the two pairs of eyes met as in a duel. Then the woman's eyes fell before the implacable, bright determination they encountered. Without a word she left the room to do his bidding.

Harry sat down and fixed his young eyes upon the haggard face of his kinsman. The sun was moving westward. It poured into the old room through the western window, where the escutcheon of the family shone down in stained glass, and the name of "Thorpe" glowed in ancient lettering. Geoffrey Thorpe had lowered his head and was fumbling nervously amongst his papers. His clawlike hands shook like withered leaves, and betrayed strong emotion which Harry suspected to be anger. He glanced away and round the room, waiting for that anger to subside. "What a pitiful old age," he thought. "What has come to the old man to make him look like that? He might be so happy if he'd let me look after him, and pull the old place together and arrest this awful decay. Is there something to hide, or is it a brain disorder?" Harry concluded it must be the latter. What could Geoffrey

Thorpe have to hide? He could think of nothing, knowing all his circumstances.

The walls of the room he sat in were paneled in diaper-patterned oak, and some fine pictures hung in places. They accorded ill, in their mellowed beauty, with the portrait hanging behind Geoffrey Thorpe's chair. Harry hated it. The furniture, bookcases choked with dust-laden volumes, and heavily carved chairs, were fine specimens dating from Jacobean days. A couple of richly carved chests gaped open, disgorging rolls of yellow parchment heavily sealed.

"What a room for an antiquary to be let loose in," thought Harry.

Then Mrs. Greatrex entered carrying a foaming tankard of battered silver bearing the Thorpe coat.

Harry rose and took it from her with a word of thanks, then, as the door closed behind her again, he turned to his kinsman.

"Sir! Your very good health."

There was no acknowledgment of the toast and Harry took a long draught.

"By Jove! What ale!" he exclaimed; "it's nectar of the gods, drawn pure and cool straight from the cellar. The beer the outside world drinks now is sorry stuff."

The old man took no notice of the remark but continued to fumble amongst his papers. "So this is what Letty has to put up with, is it?" thought Harry. "I'll have another try. Nothing like patience and perseverance."

"I suppose you take a stroll every day this fine weather?"

"I never go out."

The reply was rapped forth so sharply that Harry almost jumped.

"That seems a pity," he commented. "Surely it would do you good to get out into the sunshine?"

No reply was vouchsafed to this suggestion, and at that moment Letty entered, and with a swift smile walked to her chair by the broad latticed window.

Harry followed her, and took a seat near, watching her as she sat looking out with hands folded in her lap. The sunshine gleaming on the pale gold threads of her hair added a vivid calmness, like flowers at evening, to the delicate face. The picture of her seated there amid age and decay stayed with Harry long afterwards. The wide gray eyes had that liquid look which speaks of a mind full of untold things rather than external objects; nothing blurred or unfinished, but only like a perfect white flower with a faint tinge of color in its petals.

The midday dinner, though strictly plain, was exceedingly good and well cooked. A leg of tender home-grown mutton, served with potatoes that were balls of flour, and a rice pudding to follow. The whole washed down by ten-year-old brown ale in a foaming goblet.

During the meal Harry was thoroughly at his ease. He looked, talked, and acted like one who took for granted the courtesy which he would have exercised himself, had the circumstances been reversed. The old man's impenetrable exterior and harsh rejoinders made no more impression upon him than Sarah's face, which was bitter beyond words as she condescended to set the food before them on the table. He kept up a light, running conversation with Letty, who ably seconded his endeavors to be cheerful, but there was

one thing the girl noticed that seemed to make no less impression upon her lover than it did upon herself. The portrait seemed to fascinate him against his will, and he stared often at it as if trying to trace some illusive likeness.

Turning suddenly from one of those puzzled glances he met the eyes of Geoffrey Thorpe, furtively watching him.

"Is it a good likeness?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes," was the dry, clipped reply.

"Surely he must have changed greatly since that was painted?"

"Possibly."

"It's a most unpleasant portrait," declared Harry. "I've always heard he was a strikingly handsome man, with an extraordinary attractiveness about him, but there's something most forbidding, something defiant and cynical about that chap that I can't stand." Then he laughingly added: "Of course you know of the rot talked by some people about here. They swear he isn't dead, that he'll turn up some fine day and revolutionize things here."

Letty, with all her senses strained to acute attention, was conscious that Sarah Greatrex was standing still as if transfixed, and she shot a swift, stealthy glance at Geoffrey Thorpe. The result upon the old man of Harry's careless speech was electrical and startling. His face faded to a ghastly pallor and he threw an affrighted glance over his shoulder. Then anger seized him and his voice quivered with half-suppressed passion.

"How dare you repeat that unhealthy gossip in my house?" he demanded. "I'm surprised at your listening to it, you who ought to know better. The

young man, remember, would not be recognizable now if he were still alive."

Harry smiled indolently and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm afraid, sir, you can't stop people talking. How old was Mark Thorpe when he left this country?"

"I don't remember," was the gruff retort.

Harry changed the subject, turning to Letty and asking her if she had heard any news of her pupil.

"Yes! I had a letter yesterday from her mother. Gladys is not well, and there is just a chance of their not returning to London for some months. In that case I should at once look out for another situation."

"There will be no necessity for you to do that."

It was Geoffrey Thorpe who spoke, and both the young people glanced at him in undisguised amazement. The tone of his voice had utterly changed—it was conciliatory, almost suave.

"I'm well aware, niece, that this is no cheerful abode for the young, but you are welcome to remain here so long as it suits your convenience."

Letty had never heard her uncle make so long a speech before, and she stammered out her thanks in rather haphazard fashion. She had been under the firm conviction that he was counting the days till her departure. Now he offered her unlimited hospitality.

"You know my ways by now, and you do not interrupt me. I am old and a recluse, but if you can put up with these conditions I shall be pleased if you will remain," he concluded almost gently.

The girl's heart was touched, and she instantly reproached herself for the utterly wrong view she had formed of her uncle's character. She thanked him again most warmly, and, the meal being over, she rose and left the two men alone.

Geoffrey Thorpe's manner had indeed undergone a startling change, which Harry noticed with secret amazement. He talked now as his kinsman never dreamed he could talk, in a nervous excited voice, and two spots of scarlet shone on his pallid sunken cheeks. He hobbled to a cupboard and brought out with tender care an old cobwebbed bottle, pressing its contents upon Harry. He seemed terribly anxious to make full amends for his former incivility.

Meanwhile Letty had made her way back to the trysting-place by the lake, and, as she surmised, her lover was not very long in joining her.

"Wasn't it a success?" he exclaimed boyishly. "Why, the old chap was simply tumbling over himself to be civil before I tore myself away. Asked me to shoot as many partridges as I liked, and showed me where I'd always find a gun and cartridges. The only stipulation was, I wasn't to disturb him more than I could help. It seems he's awfully busy over some old papers he's sorting out and does not want to be interrupted. Says it breaks the thread of something or other. Of course I assured him I shouldn't intrude. I'd just take the gun and hook it, if I wished to shoot."

"What can have changed him so suddenly, Harry? I feel utterly bewildered."

Harry laughed cheerfully. "Oh! of course the old chap's awfully dotty," he explained, "and dotty people are never of one mind two minutes together. I don't much fancy your being here, darling; at the same time I'm jolly glad he's invited you to stay on. That was an enormous concession for him to make, and it shows he likes you. I'm his heir and you're my future wife and future mistress here, and that makes me feel that if you can do anything to make

life pleasanter for the poor old boy, it's a sort of duty to do it."

Letty pondered those words in her heart. Outwardly she fully agreed, but a little spark of suspicion had leapt alive in her, and now she was not so sure of Geoffrey Thorpe's good intentions. She hated herself for it, but she could not help seeking for ulterior motives. That swift change from surly, angry antagonism to almost cringing civility was too sudden to be convincing. Such thoughts she determined to keep to herself. She had no intention of spoiling her lover's holiday by sowing in him the seeds of suspicion which would lead to anxiety on her account.

"I told him I'd be here a week, and that I was putting up at the White Hart," went on Harry in his happy voice, "and that I'd like, if he had no objection, to come and have a look round every day, and he was quite agreeable to that suggestion, so we'll meet here as usual at eleven a.m. and spend our few precious hours together. Oh! Letty, what a joy you are to me and how you banish the gloom of the old place."

"Yes! I don't think I could have stayed on but for you, Harry."

He noted the sudden seriousness of her voice. "It's so awfully lonely, you mean?"

"It's not so much the loneliness as——"

"Well, darling! Out with it," he urged.

For a moment there was silence, then she smiled rather wistfully and shook her head.

"Let us talk of something else. You'd only laugh at me, Harry."

"Have I ever laughed at you?" He looked at her now with an anxious expression on his face.

She slipped her hand into his. "I don't mean that you'd scoff, but it would be hard for you to understand how curious life is here. However, I mean to stay on because I fully agree with all you've just been saying. Now don't let us waste any more time. I want to ask you a question."

"Ask on, darling."

"Do you think there's any foundation for that gossip you spoke of at dinner? Could it be that Mark Thorpe is still alive?"

"Foundation? Certainly not. Mark Thorpe's as dead as mutton. If I thought he might be alive, how could I look upon myself as this old man's successor?"

"Tell me about him, Harry. How did he die, and where?" she persisted gently.

"He was last heard of on board a ship that never reached port. That must be over ten years ago, and it must be over twenty since he left this country. He was an awful scamp, Letty. At one time he was in prison, but that's about all I do know. I was too young at that time to trouble my head about family history. I just remember my father telling me the story before he died."

"And did he live here, Harry?"

"Yes, and squandered a considerable amount of money before he went abroad. I've heard he was wonderfully attractive and plausible. A chap who'd charm a bird off a tree; but that's all old history, finished and done with. Why are you so interested in him, darling?"

Letty smiled. "I'm not really interested in him, but in his portrait. It worries me. The eyes follow me about the room."

"I've heard that's a sign of a really good portrait,"

declared Harry. "You must try, darling, not to let the gloom of the place get on your nerves. Remember how long it's been neglected, but it's capable of great improvements, and some day I hope to make it look very cheerful."

They smiled into each other's eyes and then fell to silence. The sun was moving westward and threw a radiance upon their young faces. They both felt what a wonderful thing in their lives was this deep love for each other, and every fresh meeting brought greater joy than the last. By the pool lay a hush as if all nature extended to them sympathy and understood their bliss. The trees threw great purple shadows on the blue breast of the water, where moorhens swam and dived, and the fish, rising to the flies, cast ring after ring and ripple after ripple to the banks. The sky was silver gray and brooded like a dove above them. The silence of the lovers seemed more full of meaning than any words they had ever whispered.

Flop! A big fish, curved like a half moon, hurled itself out of the water and dropped down again in a shower of silver spray.

Harry sighed and looked at his watch.

"I must be off now, sweetheart. I've promised to look in on one of the old farmers and have tea with him. To-morrow at the same hour and place."

They strolled together to the dilapidated iron gates and Harry took her in his arms again. His love for her was unbounded, a love which had leapt alive in that first hour they met in Miss Thorpe's prim Hammersmith parlor five years ago. In his way he was as alone in life as Letty was, and the few hundreds a year his dead parents had left him were not enough on which to keep a wife; but his natural energy and

perseverance were spurred to their greatest effort by the promise of the future, and in glowing colors he pictured it with the girl of his heart enthroned as wife, in the house his labor would win for her.

Letty re-entered the Lake House with a light step. For the first time she forgot how dark and dismal it was, and a tell-tale radiance was upon her face as she opened the living-room door. The presence of her uncle recalled her instantly to all the old difficulties. His secretive, angry glance was full upon her, and his passion seemed to rise as he noted the signs of happy youth in her shining glance and delicately flushed cheeks. His former conciliatory manner had vanished, and it flashed across Letty that she had only dreamt it.

"How dare you invite that young cub into my house?" he flared out violently. "I thought you understood your position better. I deny you nothing in reason, but I won't permit you to invite people inside my property, my house. Recollect that," he added, banging his bony fist on the table.

"I never invited Harry Thorpe here, and he told you so, Uncle."

He disregarded her quiet denial. "I'll not have any one here," he continued furiously. "I tell you it's strictly forbidden. I won't have any one spying about me and my belongings. You can tell Thorpe, next time you see him, to keep his distance. He's no right here till I'm dead. Now that's all I have to say. You understand?"

Her lover's words came back to her. She had been convinced from the first that her uncle's mind was deranged and Harry thought the same. It made her accept his violent onslaught with quiet, unruffled dignity.

"Yes, uncle, I quite understand, and so far as I am concerned your wishes shall be strictly respected," she replied gently; then she seated herself quietly in the window and took up her sewing. Not another word passed that night between uncle and niece.

Later, when she went to her room, her solitude was lightened by the memories of the day and the blissful hours she had passed with her lover. She could still feel his kisses on her lips, and the strength of his sheltering arms.

His adoring words came back to her, and touched her with the consciousness that she was young and devotedly loved. The future lying before her was radiant with hope. Life was not always to be silent and gloomy, and meanwhile she must bear with the old man's whims, and strive to do all in her power to lighten the sadness of his old age. Filled with these thoughts she undressed and went to bed and to sleep.

She was roused thoroughly and completely. In the actual room all was quiet, the window was wide open and a splash of pale moonlight fell athwart the black oak floor and heavy furniture. It was the same story of the stealthy footsteps down the gallery, the sliding movement of the phantom hand on the wall behind her bed, and then the steps dying away again into the distance. In her startled imagination she followed them along the Ghost's Walk, through the dark tangled wood to the lake. She measured the tread of the furtive footsteps in the gallery, wondering if they would return.

The lonely night wore on. The clock in the village church tower tolled off the leaden-footed hours. The pale moon set and the east grew rosy with dawn, but the footsteps did not return.

Gradually her thoughts slid away into that other world through which she loved to wander. Such heavenly dreams covered with fresh spring fragrance, the grave of the dying and the dead in which she now seemed buried.

CHAPTER VII

MRS. DAVENANT MEETS HARRY

MRS. DAVENANT did not forget her promise to write to Letty Thorne. She dispatched a charming little note to her containing an invitation to lunch for a couple of days ahead, and she found herself looking forward with interested anticipation to their meeting. She was eager to see the girl again, not only because she liked her, and was curious to know if she had been through any psychic experiences, but because of an interest she took in Letty's present surroundings.

There had been incidents in the life of Mrs. Davenant which had brought her into touch with certain members of the Thorpe family. They were incidents of long ago, and had no connection with the present day, but they had been painful enough to leave scars on her memory which would never be obliterated.

On mentioning her traveling companion to Miss Howard, that lady had answered uncompromisingly—“I told you so. You insisted on taking this house and coming to live in this neighborhood in spite of my warnings. Of course you were bound to come in contact with some member of the Thorpe family.”

“What does it matter?” retorted Mrs. Davenant, imperturbably. “I've done with them many a long year ago.”

"They may not have done with you." Agnes Howard spoke calmly, but she thought to herself that it might matter a very great deal, and lead to endless complications, but she did not say so. It might, on the other hand, lead to nothing at all. Why anticipate trouble? They had both gone through so much in the past, and the present was so tranquil.

So the letter to Letty was written and posted, and the girl at once showed it to her lover.

"Of course you'll go, darling," he concluded.

"I thought of refusing. It'll be your last day, Harry, and I don't want to lose a moment of you," she demurred.

"You won't lose a moment, sweetheart. We'll meet here as usual at eleven, and then I'll walk with you as far as Little Glentworth, and after lunch we'll meet again at some spot arranged. I'd like you to make friends in the neighborhood. Though the old man bangs his doors in the face of all and sundry, that need not affect you. Go about as much as you can. It'll ease the tedium, and every one about here knows what he is. They'll understand that you can't invite them back."

Letty pondered on this sound advice. She was depressed, and rather sad because of another letter she had received making it clear that her pupil would not require her services any longer. The girl was too ill now to receive any tuition. This probably meant that she would remain on at the Lake House for some weeks longer. It was what Aunt Fanny advised, and it seemed her fate. Harry broke in on those musings.

"I hear Mrs. Davenant has taken a long lease of Little Glentworth. It's a lovely old place. What's she like?"

"Perfectly charming and lovely, with dreams of clothes and pearls. She was in the railway carriage when we said good-by."

"I didn't notice her. I'd eyes only for you, sweetheart, but she must be a good sort. She needn't have remembered to write, and it would be ungracious of you to refuse. There isn't too much kindness in this world," concluded Harry with the air of a man of seventy.

So it was arranged, and two days later the lovers set off together for their walk to Little Glentworth, life looming before them as straight and simple as the high road they walked upon.

Their route lay through the village of Great Glentworth, and of all the old-world, out-of-the-way hamlets, it seemed to its rare visitors the sleepest and loveliest. Though it could not attain to the dignity of more than one shop, post office and general provisioner combined, it was inordinately proud of the White Hart where Harry lodged. A rambling, old-fashioned inn, which once in coaching days had known great prosperity, and was now waking to renewed life as the era of the automobile asserted ever more triumphantly its hold upon England. Great Glentworth was also very proud of its Manor House, the imposing massiveness of which no modern builder could achieve. Once a week the villagers had permission to wander through the great gardens sheltered by ruddy fruit-covered walls; to stray by its fish ponds, in whose muddy depths and weedy surfaces fat carp dwelt secure; to pace the broad terraces facing west, or linger by the ancient bowling greens and let the thoughts rove without bias like the bowls themselves. Great Glentworth seemed a sleeping village as the lovers strolled through

its wide main street, which was more a glorified lane than anything else, and with one accord they paused at the crowded little window of the one and only shop.

"Let's buy some bull's eyes, they're always ripping in a place like this," suggested Harry.

Letty hesitated. "Don't you think it would be wise to wait till after lunch?" she urged.

"I certainly think it would be wise," said a laughing voice behind them, and, swinging round, they found themselves face to face with Mrs. Davenant.

Harry laughingly uncovered, whilst Letty, with a brilliant blush, shook hands.

"We were on our way to Little Glentworth—at least I was. Harry—Mr. Thorpe was only taking me as far as your gates," explained Letty, rather incoherently.

Mrs. Davenant offered her hand to the young man and her eyes danced with fun.

"Mr. Thorpe will, I hope, take us both to the house and remain to luncheon. You are a relation of Mr. Thorpe of the Lake House, I presume?"

"I am only his kinsman," answered Harry, modestly, "and also, of course, a kinsman of Miss Thorne's. I'm spending a few days at the White Hart over yonder. It's a nice, comfortable old inn. It's awfully kind of you to invite me to lunch."

"So you're not stopping at the Lake House; I wonder why not," thought Mrs. Davenant. Aloud she said smilingly: "I wish I'd known you were in the village. I believe I'd have come to call. How long are you staying?"

"I regret to say I go back to-morrow, and I'd have been indeed honored to have received you in the White Hart best parlor."

She looked at him with her beautiful smiling eyes. "I'm sorry you go so soon, and it's all the more reason that you should accept my invitation now. Come! Let's walk on, it's nearly half-past one, and you can buy your bull's eyes after luncheon."

She turned, as though the subject needed no further discussion, and Harry, nothing loth, thanked her and marched alongside.

For a few moments they kept up a running fire of platitudes, then Mrs. Davenant glanced up at the six feet of her companion and said demurely—

"I think I've seen you before, haven't I, Mr. Thorpe?"

Harry steadily met the blue eyes innocently raised to his. For a second or two he looked inquiringly into them, striving to make up his mind upon a very important matter. Then he decided what action to take.

"Yes, probably you saw me saying good-by to Letty at Paddington, Mrs. Davenant."

"Yes, that was when I did see you. In fact I could hardly have helped seeing you, could I?" There was demure fun in her voice. She had lowered her eyes.

For a moment or two there was silence as the three walked briskly forward, then Harry plunged. What was the use of fencing with a woman towards whom his instinct urged him to be perfectly open.

"I believe you're to be trusted, Mrs. Davenant, but even if you aren't you've got the whip handle of us. You saw us say good-by to one another, and I freely own that what you saw was—well, implicating, to say the least of it."

"I did see you, and I thoroughly entered into the

meaning of what I saw," she retorted quite gravely. Then she glanced up at him. "Mr. Thorpe, I'm to be trusted, anyway where a love story is concerned. You'd better make a clean breast of yours and no more ado about the matter. You'll find me thoroughly sympathetic."

"I wonder!"

"You don't really. Try me and prove it. Why should I be different to others? Look at any book-stall you like and you'll soon see what the popular literature consists of. The pictures wrapping the majority of the books represent a man and a woman embracing, or about to embrace. Love is the subject that never palls, that never loses its infinite attractions. Kingdoms and kings may rise and fall, but love goes on forever. It is the only subject that has ever been known to hold the sustained interest of the British race. People marveled at the welcome given to Hawker. They didn't see through the *Daily Mail's* consummate understanding of human nature in giving us daily pictures of Mrs. Hawker and the baby. It was love, the young wife and baby waiting at home, that really roused that ovation. The public didn't care twopence about the Atlantic. All they cared for was to see love re-united."

Harry capitulated amidst laughter. "It's most awfully decent of you to take an interest in us, Mrs. Davenant, and I don't mind telling you exactly how Letty and I stand," he went on recklessly. "You see, we love each other. We're engaged, but privately, that's all there is to it."

"Privately! That means you've met with opposition which, after all, is only set up to be knocked down. Who opposes you, Mr. Harry?"

"Miss Thorpe. She's warned me off the Hammer-smith premises, and made the deuce of a row over our meeting, even when I was over on a day or two's leave."

"The devil she did," laughed Mrs. Davenant. "Supposing she should continue to refuse her consent?"

He shook his head and set his lips. "It won't make the smallest difference to us in the long run, but as her house is Letty's only home, we have to be cautious in the meanwhile till we can afford to defy her."

"But why should she object to your engagement?" persisted Hilda.

"Oh! just dog in the mangerism and pure cussedness. She doesn't want Letty herself, and she doesn't want any one else to have her if she can prevent it."

"What an attractive character Miss Thorpe is possessed of," laughed Hilda. "She seems to share some of Uncle's peculiarities."

"Oh! Uncle, he's much worse," burst out Letty. "He must never know we're engaged. Our love for one another is far too sacred and precious a thing to be trampled upon and sneered at by him. He'd be hideously sarcastic if he knew. Oh! you don't know what he is!"

"I can imagine, even though I've never seen the old gentleman. I think of him as a sort of old Scrooge. Now tell me, when do you propose to get married? Remember, even love's not enough to begin on, and much less is it enough to live by."

"The first moment I've earned enough to keep a wife," declared Harry, promptly. "I hope that'll be

in about another year to eighteen months. It's not so long to wait."

"Not so long to wait! Why, a year's a lifetime, and you've lost five already, and even love's young dream hasn't solved the problem of perpetual youth," exclaimed Mrs. Davenant.

"It's not a lifetime when you're in love. Then a year's only about ten minutes, and our meetings are only about one second. This week's passed like winking."

"I suppose, after all, it would be like that," mused Hilda with a trace of melancholy.

"You won't give us away, Mrs. Davenant?"

"I'd die sooner. I'm as safe as a safe deposit. What's more, I'll do all I can to help you. The vicar, Mr. Warburton, is coming to lunch. So we'll have to bluff a little in his presence, but there'll be no need to bluff in mine."

"I know Warburton and like him awfully," declared Harry, "and it's extraordinarily good of you to be so friendly towards us. When I'm gone it'll be a great comfort to me to think Letty's got a friend in you. It's a sad sort of life for her at the Lake House."

"Are you friendly with Mr. Thorpe?" asked Hilda.

"Hardly friendly," confessed Harry. "He has to tolerate me to a certain extent, because I succeed him in the property."

"Ah! that does make the situation much more thrilling," she exclaimed, looking up more seriously at him. "So you're the next-of-kin. That's really very interesting."

"Yes! I'm the next-of-kin. Had my father lived he would have succeeded. Mark Thorpe was still

alive when I was a lad. Geoffrey, the present man, succeeded him, and my father would have been the next heir had he lived."

"And what happened to Mark Thorpe?" asked Hilda, deeply interested.

"He was drowned in a shipwreck years ago, and I'm afraid he wasn't much loss. He was always a real rotter, and we never heard very much about him. Luckily he left no progeny to inherit his villainies."

"That was a mercy," exclaimed Mrs. Davenant; "but there's always a black sheep in every family. Sometimes there's even quite a large flock. Well! I hope when you and Letty marry and succeed to the Lake House you'll turn out all the ghosts. I'm told there are flocks of them."

Mrs. Davenant, as she spoke, glanced gayly at the girl, and a queer little thrill ran through her.

"She's actually seen something," she thought instantly, as she met full the wide gray eyes. If ever fear was expressed on any face it was expressed on that of Letty Thorne.

"Oh! that's all tommy rot, Mrs. Davenant," Harry assured her smilingly. "The truth is, Geoffrey Thorpe himself sent abroad the rumor that the old place is badly haunted, just to keep away the neighbors. He's a hermit and hardly sane."

Letty Thorne said nothing, and they turned in at the lodge gate of Little Glentworth and walked briskly up the half-mile drive. Mrs. Davenant apparently accepted Harry's explanation and changed the conversation. When he had departed she would find an opportunity of discovering all the girl knew.

When they entered the drawing-room they found Miss Howard entertaining Mr. Warburton. A tall

intellectual-looking man, who had a quiet fund of humor and a very broad outlook on the world.

"I've brought Mr. Harry Thorpe to lunch," said Mrs. Davenant as she shook hands and made her guests known to one another. "He's been staying at the White Hart, and I'm so sorry I've only discovered him as he's leaving."

"And I've had bad luck in missing you. When you came to see me, and I went to see you. They told me at the inn that you were away at the Lake House," said Warburton.

"I was very busy enjoying a holiday," laughed Harry a trifle self-consciously, "and I'm off back to work to-morrow; however, I hope to return before very long, sir."

Warburton turned and sat down beside Letty, regarding her with interested scrutiny. He had heard of her arrival, but had not chanced to see her before. She suddenly appealed to the tenderness of his nature. The smooth skin, almost waxen in texture, had a suggestion of delicacy, and the wistful glance of the large gray eyes in repose made up an effect which Warburton found touched him a good deal.

"I wish I could offer to be of some use to you, Miss Thorne. I heard of your arrival, but you probably know that your uncle bars us all out."

"Alas! yes, I do know that. He makes no secret of it. I wish he wasn't so very peculiar," answered Letty, regretfully.

Warburton smiled reassuringly. "Oh! well, after all, Mr. Thorpe has a right to be peculiar, so long as he doesn't harm any one else in being so. If he prefers perfect solitude, why shouldn't he have it? But I fear it's rather a dull life for you, and I was delighted

to hear from Mrs. Davenant that she's persuaded you to come here to-day."

"Oh! I don't mind dullness in the least," declared Letty, earnestly, "and Uncle gives me perfect liberty. The fact is, he's not normal, poor dear; that's the real root of the trouble."

"Does he know you are lunching here to-day?" asked Mrs. Davenant.

Letty blushed suddenly, and looked startled and distressed.

"Oh! no. I never dreamed of asking him if I might come."

"And he won't ask where you've been on your return?"

The girl shook her head, and answered with a pretty little touch of defiance—

"He hardly ever speaks, and he doesn't take the faintest interest in my movements. If he did ask, of course I should be perfectly frank with him. Why should I not?"

"Why, indeed; but what a strange existence for any man to lead," murmured Warburton. "I am profoundly sorry for him."

"So am I," responded Letty, quietly, "because he always seems so terribly unhappy."

They went in to lunch, and the Lake House was forgotten in the gayer topics that were introduced by Mrs. Davenant and ably seconded by Agnes Howard and Warburton, but every now and again the vicar's eyes strayed first to Letty and then to Harry in a puzzled way. He was clearly trying to decide upon their relationship. Mrs. Davenant was more interested than ever in her young friend. She had expected her to be shy and nervous, with the gauchiness of

youth and an obscure life, but Letty had serenity, a rare quality in a girl of her age. She could be merry upon occasion in a gentle, tranquil way, and as her self-confidence expanded under the shelter of their growing intimacy she disclosed plenty of initiative and individuality. Hilda also felt much admiration for Harry Thorpe. She liked his quiet, self-respecting air, as of one who, having thus far won the battle of life, has the longing for wider conflict. She felt instinctively he was a true and earnest soul, and she suspected he set a high value on the future, and what life would be worth to himself and others. He would neither be seriously thwarted nor trifled with, and he would prefer self-help to being helped.

“Even I could not tear him away from the pale little girl he loves,” she thought, with a backward glance into her past, “but I’d never try. I’ve always tried to play the game, and I’m too much in love with love to wound it.” Then she looked at Harry with calm, clear eyes, prematurely old in the experience of life.

CHAPTER VIII

LOCAL GOSSIP

“WHAT a dream place,” said Hilda Davenant to herself, when for the first time she gazed upon the Lake House.

Hilda was an excellent walker and she loved exercise. The fact had helped materially to preserve her youth and beauty. Clad in short tweed skirt, sports coat, and low-heeled, stoutly soled boots, she had just covered three miles, and felt no fatigue or reluctance to cover another three on the return journey.

“Yes, what a dream place!” she repeated softly and meditatively, as, leaning on her stick, she surveyed her lonely and beautiful surroundings.

She had gradually come to know exactly where the Lake House was situated, and had mapped out its geography for herself. She concluded that by following certain lanes and paths across the fields, she could come within sight of the place, and avoid all high roads and established approaches. Quietly, and without mentioning the fact to any one, she had learned how to reach the spot she longed to look upon.

It was early on a brilliant October afternoon that she had carried out her plan, and now she felt rewarded. Across bare stubbles, across dry ditches still blind

with luxuriant foliage, through narrow, overhung lanes and wide green pasturages she had reached her destination, and not once had she needed to inquire her way, which was lucky. She had met only one very infirm old laborer, and numerous cattle and grazing horses that had lifted their heads and stared in astonishment at so unusual an apparition.

Hilda found herself on the opposite side of the lake to that on which the house was situated. She stood amidst very rough ground, grass-grown and starred with large brilliant scarlet fungi. Sparse and ancient firs rose at intervals, and numerous dead giants of the forest lay prone where the wind had laid them.

Immediately in front of her the land shelved abruptly down towards the lake. Here and there were narrow tracks made by poachers, sheep and rabbits, amongst the confused wilderness of great boulders, enormous plumes of ferns, and a network of branches. The lake lay like a sheet of dull silver, not a breath moving its surface, long purple shadows of trees and cloud motionless upon its bosom. On the other side of the water from where she stood lay the remains of a summerhouse. Once it had pretended to be a Greek temple, now it was nothing but a confused heap of rotting timber. It stood on higher ground above the lake, and its back was turned to a dense wood which lay between the lake and the Lake House.

From the elevation upon which Mrs. Davenant stood, and the angle at which she chanced to catch it, she could see the house around which so much mystery had gathered. The sun fell full upon the long beamed frontage, of what Claude Carlton had

spoken of as one of the finest examples of black and white architecture in England. Sunshine bathed the great smokeless chimney stacks, and latticed windows in a blaze of shimmering gold, yet over all there seemed to hang an atmosphere of profoundest melancholy.

It lay there so silent, so bereft of all those cheerful stirring sounds of life attendant on a great property. At Great Glentworth on such a golden afternoon the guns would be popping in the stubbles or at the cover-side. Foresters would be busy with the ax, the saw and the pruning knife. There would be the jingle of harness from that old sloth, the plow, as she crept across the chocolate-colored furrows. There would be the lowing of the Jersey herd at the approach of milking time, and the neighing of one horse to another across the pastures. The whistle of Claude Carlton to his dogs, as they investigated the rabbit holes in the hedges and ditches, and the voices of men and women working in orchard and garden.

Here were no signs of human life, though wild life was present in abundance. A pair of herons fished knee-deep at the edge of the water, and the white scuds of rabbits flashed everywhere. Above, motionless on outstretched pinions, a hawk was poised, and a raven sailed by on indolent wing, pursued by a flock of foolhardy little birds, whose pugnacity was stronger than their sense of preservation.

Mrs. Davenant gazed long and earnestly on the scene, and her face was very sad and tragic. It brought back to her certain incidents in her life that she never cared to dwell upon. They were closed forever, but the memory remained and it hurt. She had so often in days gone by pictured the Lake House to herself. Now, actually face to face with the reality,

it seemed to bring back with startling clarity incidents she fain would have forgotten.

She shook herself clear of her dreams at last and peered in front of her.

"Yes, I think I might venture. There doesn't seem to be a living soul about," she said out loud to herself, and then she began to make the rough, steep descent to the edge of the lake. In another ten minutes she stood on flat ground, rather breathless and untidy from the stern opposition nature had shown towards her intentions, but comfortably triumphant at having carried out her object. She walked slowly round the bend of the lake till she reached the summerhouse, into which she penetrated, and sat down on the crazy seat to rest and think awhile.

One could dream here in the warm hushed silence. One could make love here, secure from observation. Was this where Harry and Letty came to pour out their mutual adoration? Was this where the ghost walked, and who was the ghost, she wondered? It was surprising how uncommunicative Letty was on the subject. Mrs. Davenant could and did appreciate the fact that Miss Thorne was the future mistress of the Lake House, and naturally would not desire to add to the evil reputation of her home, but she thought that Letty might have confided to her some little thrills, some little gray mystery. The truth was that though Mrs. Davenant was so keen on hearing all about the ghost, she did not really believe in its existence, and she had unconsciously adopted Harry Thorpe's explanation that the old man had himself set afloat the rumors to defend himself against all intruders, and frighten all and sundry from his doors.

Why he should desire this utter solitude was doubtless explained by insanity. Claude Carlton always spoke of him as insane, and such seemed to be the general opinion.

Now the utter peace of her surroundings began to sink into the very heart of her being, and she was conscious of a sense of contentment hitherto unknown. She told herself that she was really happy at Little Glentworth, happier than she had ever been. Country life seemed to suit her, and she adored lovely scenery and wild life. The placid, dignified existence of the landed gentry had always appealed to her in the pre-war days when she paid country visits. There was such an atmosphere of freedom from worry and care, and again such homes were being reconstructed upon their original lines. There were once more the numerous well-trained domestics under the tyranny of efficient housekeepers, and the same staffs of soft-footed men servants, who had returned slightly damaged and grateful for peace. To be waited upon, hand and foot, and only have to interview the head game-keeper, and the land agent who drew the rents was an ideal arrangement.

The wonderful unpunctuality of such lives was attractive. None now dreamed of getting up early, unless sport demanded an effort. Breakfast hung about till all hours, and the groaning luncheon boards humbly awaited the pleasure of the trenchermen to lighten their weight.

On those big estates food was no real difficulty. Fish in the river, cattle and sheep on the pastures, game and rabbits in the covers, grain, vegetables, roots and fruit, home-grown in abundance. A dairy with a safe supply of butter, milk and cream. Doubt-

less there had been a certain respect for the Food Controller's orders, but there had never been any real dearth. That sense of freedom from the law, and the prevailing economic conditions appealed strongly to Hilda's independent soul.

The life at Little Glentworth appealed to her also. She enjoyed having no engagements to keep, save an occasional luncheon or tea. She was free to dispose of her days as she pleased. She had become bored with London through sheer fatigue.

Before the war she had racketed persistently and pertinaciously, because every one else racketed, and she wished to keep step with the world. London liked her, and with ample funds, a knowledge of the ropes and but few prejudices, she had kept pace with the rapidest.

Then war broke. "Business as usual" was construed into pleasure as usual. The license of the times at first appalled her, then amused her, more often it repulsed her. She saw all moral sense scattered to the four winds of heaven, all classes abandoning themselves to unbridled freedom of moral action. She looked on, secretly wondering, whilst a stupendous avalanche overtook her sex and altered their entire future. Her set had but one object, to forget the horrors of war, and to assist the men on leave to forget their misery.

The last two years had brought about great changes. Automobiles were slung up in private garages, and there were no taxis. Her set went to work.

Hilda Davenant did her bit in a hospital war depôt all day, and walked to her evening entertainments. She dined, and danced, and supped at night, bringing

with her, as all the smart world did, a couple of bottles of champagne from her own cellar.

There was a distinct taste of novelty about life during those times of stress.

For five years there had always been the background of war, a hideous excitement from which there had been no escape.

From the moment the armistice was signed, life, for Hilda Davenant, had fallen down crash, to a horribly sordid level. Strikes, and the threat of revolution did not cause her any fear; she knew too little about them to be afraid, and England was very war-weary, so people said.

Her set was by no means weary. It was spinning round harder than ever again, and spending more than ever before upon what some silly politicians called unproductive labor. Automobiles were unslung as the chauffeurs were demobilized, and one could not as yet get taxis because they did not trouble to come out by day, preferring to earn a fiver a night for waiting outside the ballrooms. To Mrs. Davenant London had become unbearable, and she hurried out of it. She found herself in a world which hardly seemed to have changed at all. Of course there were a few empty chairs, but many had been filled again. There had been a quick change of husbands during the war. So many women had had three if not four.

Looking back on the past, Hilda Davenant knew herself to be tired in mind and body, whilst she had thought she was merely bored. Racketing no longer appealed to her, and the knowledge of what so many of her sex had done in brilliant actual war service threw her objectless life into dark and contemptible contrast. She was a very intelligent woman, who had

known what it was to earn her daily bread. In these days her thoughts had been concentrated on finding some one to lift this anxious burden from off her shoulders. She was not sure now that her happiest days had not been passed in that early struggle.

Social successes no longer attracted her, and, in the daily absence of Agnes Howard, who had entered into hospital drudgery, she found herself becoming a prey to discontent, dissatisfaction, and a sad disposition to remember all the less happy incidents in her varied career. She thought that what would please her most would be a plunge into the waters of oblivion for a while, and this desire had driven her into the country.

She had thought to find oblivion there, but had she found it? This was the question she now asked herself.

Latterly there had awakened in her the long repressed and frustrated necessities of a woman's life, which many did without, but which were none the less conditional to natural happiness. The call of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the ambition for power of woman's beauty over the senses of men! There were hours when she seemed to be the battle ground of the passions, and the reckless curiosity of the whole human race. As a married woman she could classify her own emotions, and understand her own nature as no single woman could. In resisting such onslaughts she felt as if she was wantonly flinging aside allurements and joys of quite inconceivable delight.

Formerly she had been satisfied with getting through each day with a modicum of happiness, a minimum of boredom, yet insensibly she had grown to look for something wider and deeper than that.

What was she here for, anyway? Where was she aiming for? What was her object in life? There seemed to be no answer to these questions.

She had become aware of a great void, with no solution offering itself as to how it might be filled. As physical languor wore off in the new peace and healthier life, other thoughts obtruded, and looming large was the oppression of a future empty of natural interest.

Meanwhile she was simply drifting, but the void was there. Her temperament was warm and impulsive, and capable of great and lasting devotion, and she knew that her powers of loving were being ruthlessly wasted. She had always been in love with love, but the outflow of her nature was checked at its source by some inexorable destiny.

The shadows were lengthening and the sun was nearing the brow of the cliff. Another minute or two and it would dip behind, and the lake would be plunged in gloom.

Mrs. Davenant roused herself from out her meditations, and prepared to stroll homewards. From where she sat she could discern a tiny pathway winding round the face of the cliff, and by which she could regain her former route, with the long stretches of pasture and ragged hedges lying between her and the village of Great Glentworth.

"I shall come here often again," she told herself, looking back upon the scene she had just left; "there's something strangely attractive to me in its silent ruination, it's so like my own life."

She walked slowly, pondering over those problems with which her mind had been filled all afternoon,

and it was with something of a start that she looked up in answer to a cheery salutation.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Davenant. Been for a walk? What a glorious day!"

The vicar of Great Glentworth stood before her, having just emerged from a gate leading into another meadow.

"Good afternoon," she echoed. "Where have you sprung from so suddenly?"

"I've been to see a sick friend, and took the short cut across the fields home. I always leave the dusty high road whenever I possibly can, especially on a day like this."

"It's glorious. It fills me full of thoughts and visions. I've not thought so much for a very long time as I have to-day," she declared with one of her flashing smiles.

"And they've been happy thoughts upon the whole?" he questioned, his serious eyes meeting hers for a moment as they moved on side by side.

"They were rather disturbing, thank you," she returned demurely. "One doesn't think much in London. There's no time, and I've had rather an accumulation to get through."

"Ah! that's where the country scores. It is so easy to read and think. It's a poor, arid sort of existence that never thinks."

Hilda nodded her head in assent. "There are times," she said in rather grave measured tones, "when it is wiser not to think. Coming here has been something of a turning point in my existence. I've pretty well exhausted life, and it's taken its toll of me. Though I am not really very old, I've crammed enough experience into it to fill ten lives, and now I've struck

off into quite a new track. I've left all the fun and frolic, and the reckless sort of comradeship one forms, and I've come down to this sleepy hollow to gain fresh experiences of a wholly different kind."

For a moment she looked full at him, and he at her. There was a hardly repressed excitement in her bearing and aspect, and he was conscious of responding. The monotony of his parish work, the pettiness of the lives he lived amongst, fell away, becoming for the moment as if they were not.

There was nothing of the sentimentalist about Ambrose Warburton, and the sudden appeal she made to him was hardly sensuous, still less sensual; nevertheless an almost passionate desire of earthly beauty seized upon him. Of the beauty of things seen, the beauty of the human form, of things he had read of but never beholden. Beauty of unknown distant lands, of arid deserts and snow-peaked mountains, of ancient cities with cool courts where fountains played, and, above all, the beauty of youth and the illimitable horizon of youth's hopes.

What was there in his companion that had flooded him over with such vision? He struggled against it, as against a rising tide.

Her voice recalled him. "Some day I want you to tell me things, Mr. Warburton. There are so many, many things I want to know."

"That we all want to know. There are so very few answers to our questions," he replied gently. "I can assure you I am always being humbled by the knowledge of my own ignorance."

She looked at him intently, questioningly, hesitated a moment, and then spoke again.

"I think you'd find my questions very simple and

ordinary. I know nothing about your religion, any religion. I probably wouldn't care about it even if I did understand it, but I'd like to know anything there is to be learned. I dare say it's only idle curiosity."

He looked at her from beneath his drooping eyelids. There was much speculation in his glance, but his voice was untinged by any sort of emotion.

"There really isn't very much to learn, Mrs. Davenant. My faith is so little a matter of words, and so much a matter of deeds, that it is impossible to deal with it in a mere, casual conversation. If you want words, I can sum it up in one—Love. Please don't expect too much of me. I'll do what I can when you're ready, but my whole life is one long regret for my poverty of achievement, and that poverty is, I suppose, all the more apparent to me because twice to-day I've been in the presence of those about to say farewell to this bewildering and astonishingly beautiful world. It often comes home to me how little I know, how little I've seen, and how little I've profited by my very limited experiences."

Mrs. Davenant was conscious of a chill. She had felt impelled to say what she had by some mental conflict within her, which she had not yet classified. The vicar had discouraged rather than encouraged her.

"It is understood that what I say to you is in strictest confidence," she said rather abruptly.

"Naturally so. Have no fear, Mrs. Davenant. I also expect you, and all to whom I speak on serious matters, to treat such conversations as private."

There was silence between them for a moment or two, then she spoke again.

"I suppose we really are expected to profit by our

experiences, but it's awfully difficult. You see, it's so hard to regret having been happy."

"You mean even at the expense of others?" he questioned. "I think that's very human, and, after all, what are we but human? I should like to have profited more by my sojourn here, and yet I'm so self-seeking that I'll be glad when my hour strikes. I'm frightfully keen to see the other side of the veil. My curiosity is intense. I've been balked of rich experiences and high endeavor, but I've still got the supreme, the crowning experience, which no one can ever take from me."

Hilda laughed. "Well, don't be in such a frantic hurry to gratify your curiosity. You've got to instruct me first, and I'm sure there are many who love you."

"Many!" His voice was dubious. "Why should they? I know there are some, thank^d God. The saddest thought for me would be not to be loved. I hope a few will love me as long as I live," he ended quietly.

"But you would put your religion before love?" she asked.

"My religion is love, Mrs. Davenant. It stimulates and enjoins love, since only through love can the higher spiritual attributes of our nature be developed. We say Love is God and God is Love, but there is a wonderful little prayer of à Kempis, 'Heal my heart of all inordinate affection, that I, being healed within and thoroughly purified, may be made fit to love.' I have come to be very shy of taking the word love in vain, for I really know nothing at all about it, except that it is God."

"Do you really believe that?" she asked gravely.

“Why, then, does love bring such penalties? There is something wrong somewhere. You know that without legal sanction love between woman and man is called a sin. No matter how much her mate by suitability and instinct a man may be, the woman may not give him the natural fulfillment of her love without the benediction of Church and law, yet”—she uttered a sharp laugh of inutterable scorn—“and yet there are women who ask and receive the blessings of the Church on a marriage which is a palpable black lie, a mockery of love, and therefore, according to your beliefs, a mockery of God. Such unions are nothing but legalized prostitution. The woman who really loves a man demands to be completed in him, else she is not worthy the name of woman. She demands that, no matter how things are in heaven, she shall be bound to her love by the earthly tie of the flesh.”

Her voice vibrated with strong feeling, and as he watched her closely he saw the delicate color deepen on her cheeks, but his voice was utterly unemotional as he answered—

“And that woman would be right.”

She threw back her head, and there was a swift challenge in all her attitude.

“Surely you would not say that in all cases?”

“There is a very simple rule, Mrs. Davenant, that all of us can follow. If our love cannot obtain the benediction of the Church, then, before condemning the Church, let us ask of ourselves this simple question: In giving my love in its entirety shall I wrong any fellow-creature by so doing? If, after really serious consideration the answer can be honestly given in the negative, then I should certainly say such lives are justified in union. Let us remember in speaking of

the penalties of love that love means self-sacrifice, and self-sacrifice means shouldering the cross."

She flashed her answer back in a gay swift defiance.

"And I say that in the highest regions of human feelings the law, whether of Church or State, is utterly out of place."

Their eyes met full. He smiled into hers. He did not look in the least shocked.

"I take that to be so," he replied, simply.

They fell to silence, having reached a point where words hinder rather than help thought. They were alone in a meadow filled with peaceful grazing creatures. In the distance rose the square Norman tower of Great Glentworth church. Suddenly she spoke again.

"If you are such a believer in love, why have you never married? Don't answer if you'd rather not. I realize my impertinence."

He smiled suddenly as he met her bright, questioning eyes.

"I don't mind telling you in the least, more especially as I don't want you to labor under any misapprehension as to my character. I'm awfully human, with a man's normal passions and cravings for woman, home and children, but during my mother's life I was bound to other human service."

"But your mother is dead," she ventured gently.

"Yes! She died seven years ago. She lived to a great age, and left my sister Emily to me. She had come through a great sorrow. Death took her lover. When I found myself free I realized how time had passed. It was almost too late for marriage, and my sister and my wife might not have got on under the same roof. Another, and perhaps the primary reason,

Mrs. Davenant. When I was more or less free to contract earthly ties I found—well! I had grown into the fixed habit of pouring out all my very humble adoration at the feet of the God I seek to serve.”

“I think you have been sacrificed to your family, Mr. Warburton. Such adoration as you speak of lacks the human touch, and you are very human.”

She saw a wave of color sweep over his face.

“Oh! indeed you misunderstand. I am very human, but no one who has not experienced it can know what the love of God can be to a lonely man. A love ‘closer is it than breathing; nearer than hands and feet.’”

Then for a while both were silent again as they neared the village.

“You’ll come in some time and have a quiet chat with me?” she asked, as they shook hands at the cross roads.

“Whenever I can be of service to you only let me know and appoint the hour,” he answered, and with that they parted.

“What can her life have been?” he wondered, as he walked on towards home. “She’s a type I’ve never met with before. Knows nothing of any religion, and wants to learn. I wonder? Certainly my instinct to be slightly discouraging was a wise one. Any signs of eagerness on my part would have made her swing round in the opposite direction. What’s she going to do in Great Glentworth? Make history for us, of that at least I’m certain.”

“Tea is ready,” called a voice through the open window.

He entered the Vicarage and walked straight into the parlor where his sister stood before the tea-tray.

She might have been his twin in petticoats. A tall, dignified, and even stately figure in the shadowy room, with thick iron-gray hair, dark eyes and rather large, finely cut features. Great strength of character was the impression the brother and sister conveyed to even the most casual observer.

"How is old Miles?" she asked.

Warburton sat down at the table and helped himself to bread and butter.

"Going fast, but quite happy and contented, as they all are at the very last. Lucky beggar, he'll know all about it before to-morrow morning. I met Mrs. Davenant in Miles' meadow and walked back with her."

"Mrs. Davenant! Well?" There was a note of keen questioning in her voice. Emily Warburton was deeply interested in the newcomers.

Her brother laughed frankly. "Well? What more? That's all there is to it, I know no more than you do."

"She's a profound mystery," said Emily with conviction.

"It's not our business to probe it."

"Lukily not," retorted his sister rather drily. "Oh! What a bother. Here comes Mrs. Lockett."

A silence fell, only to be broken a minute after when the caller was shown in.

"I just ran in for a second to tell you I've some old clothes for you to distribute in the parish," exclaimed Mrs. Lockett, accepting the chair and the tea Warburton set before her. "If you could kindly manage to send for them. Oh! by the way, I've just.

met the Little Glentworth mystery in the village, looking more mysterious than ever."

"I take that to mean that Mrs. Davenant was looking if possible more beautiful than ever," suggested Warburton with a slow smile.

Mrs. Lockett flushed all over her gaunt cheek bones.

"I don't quite catch your meaning," she retorted austere, and with a slightly offended air.

"Do you think if Mrs. Davenant had been a very plain woman any one would have suspected a mystery in connection with her?" asked Warburton.

Mrs. Lockett considered the question seriously. Not finding any answer worthy the occasion she said—

"But I don't consider her so beautiful, and I'm only echoing what every one else says, that she's a mystery. My Sarah is an old friend of the Little Glentworth kitchen-maid's mother, and she says there isn't a single photo, or anything at all lying about to hint at who or what the late Mr. Davenant was like. You must own that's rather suspicious?"

"I should be inclined to put that down to extreme sensitiveness, Mrs. Lockett. The lady in question does not desire to have her sacred memories exposed to the prying gaze of the public. *Le portrait que l'on ne voit pas est le seul qui compte.*"

Mrs. Lockett eyed the vicar suspiciously, but could detect no trace of sly humor in his grave face and voice. She understood no French and mistrusted those who did. She turned to chaff by way of escape, and shook her scraggy head and forefinger roguishly.

"Ah, Vicar! I fear you are very much of a man."

He was laughing now with genuine amusement. "I sincerely hope so, Mrs. Lockett; but why 'fear' to pay me such a compliment? I'm all for womanly women and manly men."

"Well, anyhow," exclaimed the lady by way of winding up that particular subject of conversation, "they say Major Carlton's very much on the spot, and that Mrs. Davenant cares for nothing but men. This place is simply teeming with mysteries. There's the Lake House mystery. What do you make of that now, Vicar?"

"I've never made anything of it but the not uncommon eccentricities of a lonely old man," smiled Warburton.

"But look how the plot has thickened lately!" exclaimed Mrs. Lockett.

"I wasn't aware of it."

Mrs. Lockett shrugged her shoulders with irritable impatience, and turned her back on him.

"Your brother is in one of his stone-wall moods this afternoon," she said to Emily Warburton. "You are, of course, aware that a young lady has come to live at the Lake House, and report says she is very friendly indeed with the heir, young Mr. Thorpe."

Emily smiled delightfully. "I'm so glad to hear that. It must be very lonely and depressing for any young creature to live alone with such a peculiar old man as Mr. Thorpe. I think Harry Thorpe is particularly attractive. He's not only very good looking but he's such a good sort."

Mrs. Lockett looked down on her plate and crumbled a piece of bread thoughtfully.

"It seems a curious position, doesn't it? No chaperone, and those two alone together all day long.

Now, in my young days such things weren't done in decent society."

"Ah! we live and learn, Mrs. Lockett. Where is decent society found? It is surely one of those suppositious conditions of life which no nation has yet achieved. Have you ever found a monopoly of goodness in any one particular sect? Do try some honey. Our bees have done so well this year," urged Emily; and then she adroitly turned the conversation into less contentious lines, much to the vicar's relief.

CHAPTER IX

AGNES HOWARD'S SECRET

AFTER Mrs. Lockett had taken her departure Warburton retired to his study, and his sister proceeded to wash the tea dishes with the help of her little maid.

Emily Warburton worshiped lovely things, and it was a pleasure to her to use the old Worcester cups and saucers, and keep burnished the old Georgian and Queen Anne plate. She put to daily use all the few beautiful articles the house contained, and she took care of them personally. There were never any domestic troubles at the Vicarage, because the two maids were well aware of the big share their mistress took in the household work.

Miss Warburton's life was in many respects a narrow and restricted one, but she was a very happy woman, despite the fact that her heart was buried in the grave of her dead lover. She had never sighed after any other man, resigning herself to her memories, and the duties of her daily life in her brother's parish.

She adored Ambrose, and insensibly, since her loss, her love for him had become more maternal than sisterly. His welfare was the first consideration of her earthly life, and she would willingly have relinquished her position, as mistress of the Vicarage, had she seen any symptoms of a desire on his part to marry. She

had detected none. Attractive young women of her own class seemed non-existent in the neighborhood, and it had never occurred to her that his fancy might fall upon some rosy-cheeked farmer's daughter.

The Warburtons had blue blood in their veins, and the consciousness of this doubtless worked as a barrier to *mésalliance*, though there was no sign of pride of birth to be detected in either brother or sister.

Emily had no conception of that which Ambrose hid so skillfully from her, his putting aside of all thought of marriage on her account. Now, as he sat in his study alone, he took himself severely to task for the small admissions he had made to Mrs. Davenant. He was pondering over the conversation that had passed between them, as they strolled across the fields, and he remembered with sudden shock that he had spoken of something which hitherto he had kept secret in his own breast. He had told her that after his mother's death Emily had become his special charge, and that death had also robbed her of her lover. Mrs. Davenant had replied, "I think you have been sacrificed to your family." Supposing this should reach the ears of Emily, what would she think of him? It was unlikely that Mrs. Davenant would betray his rash confidences, yet, on the other hand, she might do so. He did not place much reliance upon her discretion. He felt he hardly knew her, she was so illusive. There was nothing simple in her confidences to him, always he was conscious of big reservations. A wave of color, due to pure annoyance with self, flooded his cheeks. He rose and began to move restlessly about the shadowy old room.

He could not understand himself, or how he had ever been led to make such dangerous admissions.

Never, even to so dear and old a friend as Mrs. Carlton, had he confessed as much, and Mrs. Davenant had parted from him in the belief that he had been sacrificed to his family.

That was not true, and he hated untruth. He knew that if he had ever really loved a woman well enough to ask her to marry him, he would have permitted nothing to stand in his way. It was true that he had thrust aside all thoughts of marriage, because of his sister, but he had never really been tempted to act otherwise. Life, in that respect, had been made very easy for him. He rarely left home, and here he had met no woman whom he would have cared to install in the Vicarage as wife.

Suddenly he pulled himself up sharply, and stood still in the middle of the room, staring into vacancy. Was it literally true that he had seen no woman whom he could remotely conceive of as a desirable wife? A curious self-revelation was welling up within him. It seemed to arise from unplumbed, enormous depths, to be the insistent revelation of another and deeper self clamoring to be heard, and slowly it took mental shape in the form of a woman—Agnes Howard!

“Let the counsel of thine own heart stand, for there is no man more faithful unto thee than it.”

The words from the Apocrypha floated through his brain, as he stood there staring through the open window to where a thrush was joyously bathing in a stone basin on the lawn. The beauty of the physical world struck potently upon those new revelations, bringing with them a wild gambler's zest in the appreciation of their fleeting tendencies.

Agnes Howard! Yes, he had liked her from the first, and he had seen a good deal of her from time to

time, since her arrival in their midst. She had contracted quite a warm friendship with Emily. The two women "hit it off," as he expressed to himself their apparent sentiments. He had seen much more of Miss Howard than of Mrs. Davenant. They were of totally different natures. There was a lightness and frivolity about the latter that was lacking in her companion. Agnes Howard suggested greater self-reliance and steadiness, and she had shown to him that she possessed a deep fund of sympathy, and considerable worldly knowledge.

Yes! he had been greatly attracted towards her from the first, and now he knew that this attraction was developing into something infinitely warmer. Subconsciously he had been aware of this. Now the knowledge had crept over the threshold, and arrested the startled attention of his ordinary waking consciousness.

For a moment or two he abandoned himself to its sweetness, telling himself, what matter—she was unattainable; and besides, had he not decided never to marry? Surely he might give rein to his imagination for a few moments? Surely he might dream of what such a love would mean in his gray life?

Then a little serpent of fear crawled about his heart. His gray life! Supposing this new feeling grew into unmanageable dimensions? Supposing a love developed in him which was stronger than his self-control? What then?

His gray life! Did he really think thus of his pleasant, leisurely existence? Was a man's life necessarily gray if bereft of the love of woman?

The answer flashed back instantly, unhesitatingly, Yes! It was true. Gray was the soft, sober color

of peace, of the dove's wing. A lovely, meditative tone. Really the absence of color, but—it was half mourning.

Life to be full and perfect must be tinged with rose. He could think of married lives that had begun in clouds of rose, and now had faded into old rose. An exquisite color, reminiscent of by-gone loves and joys, of loves sobered by age and life's realities, but still rose. Faded tints of love's young dream which he had never known.

The old saw recurred to him, "It's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all."

He took up his pipe, filled and lighted it mechanically, and sat down in an armchair by the empty grate, then he fell to wondering about Agnes Howard's life. Why had she never married? Had she loved and lost? A woman so obviously desirable must have had many lovers. She was still very handsome, once she must have been beautiful. Some very strong reason must have held her single. What was the mystery lying at the heart of those two lives dwelling within the old Dower House? Some mystery he was sure did exist, though he had never dreamed of probing it, and discouraged the belief in others of its existence. He had become very sensitive of late to all idle gossip relating to the two ladies. Now he knew why, and he shrank back from the knowledge as a new born discovery with which he dreaded to deal.

He stared about the shadowy, paneled room, and the twilight silence of it struck him suddenly as a rousing sensation, more trying to his nervous organization than any jangling would have been at the moment.

For the first time in his life the lack of marital relations smote his brain with a strong sense of per-

sonal loss. "Man was not made to live alone." The words surged through him, as if clamoring to imprint their true meaning, which even yet he hardly realized.

He had lived a placid and ascetic life, thoroughly healthy and free from morbid longings—the life of an unthinking animal, a far from temptation. Suddenly he seemed to feel the need of a soul's companionship. A crowd of confused sensations assailed him, doubt, happiness, misery, wrangling together discordantly. His soul, aspiring always towards spirituality, was protesting against the material instincts of the body. From out the peaceful unthinking past had sprung up a new set of impressions, electrical, and to him terrifying in their persistency. His nervous system was unhinged, something foreign had entered in and was making itself strongly felt.

A new side of his nature had slidden uppermost, which the religious temper of his life had bidden him suppress. Human nature, deeming it a crime that violence should be done to its strict fidelity, was insidiously pointing out hazardous and pernicious courses.

In his scrupulous idealism he had always looked upon himself as a part of a great faith, which had grown through and through his life, as the roots of a tree bind themselves round some finite structure. Suddenly his foundations were shaken from under him, and a vision almost beatific of new possibilities of life, opened out before the rent secrecies of his soul.

It seemed to him that he had paid too high a price for the life of celibacy he had lived. He had sacrificed a myriad sympathies and hypothetical joys.

"At last I know what it would mean to live," he whispered below his breath.

Only the pregnant silence answered him, and as its voiceless echoes eddied round the room the dark curtain fell again. Life was gray.

A pause—voices were drifting in to him from the garden. He stiffened, listening intently. Then he leapt to his feet, and taking his hat, he passed through the back of the house into the village.

Meanwhile Emily Warburton had strolled out amongst her flowers, and began gathering a nosegay of everything sweet she could find. She was a noted gardener, and the work of her hands and the joy of her heart was one of those things visitors in the neighborhood were always taken to see in the time of the roses.

To-night she was intent upon a little service of love she constantly offered up, and with her scissors she carefully cut off two white moss roses and added them to her bunch.

“May I join you for a few moments?”

Emily glanced up and met the smiling eyes of Miss Howard fixed upon her from the far side of the sweet-briar hedge.

“Why, of course, do come in. Have you had tea?”

Agnes replied that she had, and was out for a stroll in the cool of the evening.

“I’ve been getting rid of a headache all day, and Hilda was tired. She’s been off on one of her long tramps, so I sallied forth alone,” she said, passing through the little wicket and joining Emily on the wide turf walk. She threw up her head and smiled appreciatively.

“How heavenly! All the scents blended together

make one absolutely perfect perfume which I suppose can never be bottled. Are you making a bouquet for some one?"

"Yes, I'm making a bouquet for some one, to whom I always give my best. I'm going to take it to him in a moment. Will you come? It isn't far."

"I'd love to come," Miss Howard answered as she moved about amongst the flowers, bending over the tall lilies, then over the roses and drinking in their fragrance.

Agnes Howard was looking very well in a perfectly cut holland coat and skirt. In the creamy laces at her breast she had fastened a bunch of crimson roses. On her dark hair was set a wide-brimmed leghorn hat, trimmed with a simple black velvet band. Emily noted the supreme elegance of her companion's attire, but with no touch of envy. She was quite aware that her simple cotton frocks were of rustic cut and make, but that never disturbed her. She was always exquisitely neat, but she had no natural love of fine clothes for herself, though she immensely admired those worn by other people.

"I'm ready now," she called softly to the idly strolling figure at a little distance.

The old gray Vicarage stood on rising ground which looked across a softly undulating valley. The Great Glentworth woods sheltered it behind from the northern blasts. The southern frontage looked out over a wide expanse of copse, pasture land, and winding river.

Closely adjoining the house was the little Norman church, with its low arched roof, its quaint carvings, its solid square tower—its round-headed leaded windows.

The two women took a short cut by a path leading

to the churchyard, dark with the shadows of venerable yews, yet singularly peaceful in the golden glory of the autumn evening, and as they walked up the narrow path between many an unnamed grass-grown grave, Emily paused and bent her head. For ten years she had never failed to pause there in passing. When first she had bent her head before the white cross her hair had been glossy, black as the raven's wing, now it was banded with white, white as the marble upon which was inscribed:—

"To the undying memory of
"CLIFTON CAREW,
"Major, 18th Hussars."

"There is no Death! What seems so is transition;
This life of mortal breath
Is but a suburb of the life Elysian,
Whose portal we call Death."

Both women stood in silence looking down on the grave, Agnes Howard reading the inscription for the first time.

"Did you know him?" she asked gently.

Emily had stooped to pick up a bunch of fading flowers that lay on the green mound. She laid her fresh nosegay in its place and straightened herself.

"Yes! I knew him well, and loved him dearly. We were to have been married, but he died a fortnight before our wedding day."

She was smiling, and her voice was just the same, calm and composed, but for a few seconds Agnes Howard gazed at her in absolute confusion. Then, she felt herself in the throes of a great emotion. When she came to search for words she could find none that were consecutive. The reality of the tragedy overwhelmed speech.

"I had not heard. I had no idea that such a sorrow had fallen upon your life," she stammered.

Emily was speaking again in her quiet, unemotional way. "He was the only man I have ever cared for. He caught a chill after saving two children who had fallen through the ice at the edge of the river. It was a very hard winter that year, and though he changed into dry clothes almost at once, pneumonia set in and nothing could be done. I sat by him in the Vicarage and saw him die. That is my life's story, a very simple and common one, but, for me—— Well, it meant just this. All the heart I possessed was in his keeping. It is his still, and will be his, I believe, throughout eternity. So many women live happily on with their dead hopes and faded memories. Mary of old time must have been one of these. I have always felt how deeply she loved Our Lord. She gave all she had, her sacrificial love in a flask of fragrant ointment, poured out on the feet of her beloved who died a few hours after for the sins of the world."

Agnes Howard's eyes were clouded by unshed tears. Not those of sorrow, but born of the sharp vibrations running through her, of another memory—of her own. There fell a silence between them, then Emily spoke again.

"Don't look so sad. I don't know why I brought you here or why I told you this. I acted on a sudden impulse, born of some innate sympathy I find in you. It always seems so strange to me that such fidelity to love as I own for my lover, and he owns for me, should be counted a morbid sentimentality rather than a virtue. Alas! the world is still a very long way from grasping the full meaning of immortality. It is as if the so-called dead have, since the world began, beaten

fruitlessly against the iron walls of the human breast, their entreaties falling on deaf ears, their memories hidden away under the weight of costly stone and marble in the cemeteries of the world. How cruel it seems to let the beloved souls go out into the unknown, mourned by futile tears which dry so soon and are so soon forgotten. Have you ever thought, Agnes, how sadly the departed must mourn over the broken bridge, deliberately severed by those remaining on earth?"

"I can understand such thoughts coming to you," replied Miss Howard earnestly.

"They are thoughts coming to many more now, since the war desolated so many homes," went on Emily. "It was whilst I stood by this open grave on a clear winter morning, whilst I looked down into the tomb where they had lowered the coffin, that something bade my thoughts look up and my heart gave a sudden throb of joy. I had looked on death, and death had looked back and smiled on me from a land full of life and vigor, love, and sunshine, and I realized that life and death are one. I knew I had not left my beloved lying there cold and alone, and I no longer felt the same towards the freshly made grave. Never again did I call death by the name it was known by on our earth, for it no longer symbolized to me tombs and corpses. It was given to me to know that death is not death to the dying, but only to the blind ones left behind."

They stood silent and very still a moment or two, amid the singing of the birds. A lark had carried its music out of sight high up against a gray cloud, as larks so often do before gathering and departing, and as they listened to the exquisite rain of song Emily spoke again very softly.

"Yes! I am faithful and ready when God wills." Had her words found their home? It seemed to Agnes Howard that she could not doubt. She smiled suddenly, her eyes filled with a glad acquiescence, then she threw out her hands in one of her sudden graceful gestures.

"Ah! how good it is to know you. To know how faithful a woman's heart can be, and how happy that faithfulness can make its possessor. Ours is really the sympathy of a common sorrow, which, in our different ways, we have outlived. I suffered a similar loss, though it did not come about in a similar manner."

Emily bent her head in comprehension and slipped her arm into her companion's.

"Let us stroll quietly on for a little. It's so good to have some one to confide in. I have never really had any one before. I try never to talk on sad subjects to Ambrose. So you lost your lover also, Agnes?"

"Yes, he left me for another woman whom he ultimately married. That marriage only endured a year. I was then living with my brother in Washington. I continued to live on with him till he also died. Since then Mrs. Davenant and I have been inseparable companions."

"You never thought of marrying any one else?" asked Emily.

Miss Howard shook her head. "Never! This man treated me shamefully, yet at first I cared so much for him that I promised to be his wife. He killed all love out of me, and for years after I despised and disliked all men. I've got over that now. I'm alone in the world, my parents and brother are dead. I don't expect ever to see America again."

"But you are not American?"

"No, we are British born, but my brother became an American citizen. I adored him, and looked after him as you look after your brother. He died unmarried. Why, is his secret, not mine."

"But you are happy now, are you not?" asked Emily rather anxiously. "I am quite happy, and cheerful, mothering Ambrose."

Miss Howard laughed rather mirthlessly. "Oh! yes, quite happy, even though I've got no Ambrose to mother. I wonder he's never married. I suppose you make him so comfortable he doesn't feel the need of a wife?"

"He's never seen a woman he cared to marry," declared Emily with conviction. "I would not have stood in his way if he ever had. I don't suppose he'll ever marry now, bless him."

They had reached the gates of Little Glentworth, and she paused and held out her hand.

"We are agreed that our conversation shall be regarded as absolutely private?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Miss Howard. "I would not have spoken as I have, if I hadn't felt you were to be trusted. Good-night, Emily."

"Good-night, Agnes."

Miss Warburton had walked on but a very few steps when she heard her name called softly, and turning round, she perceived Agnes Howard running back to her.

"Emily," she whispered rather breathlessly. "I feel there is one person whom I should like to share my confidence with you. I know he is so entirely trustworthy."

"My brother!" Emily knew instantly to whom

Agnes referred. It seemed to her a very natural feeling. Every one told their secrets to Ambrose.

"It shall be as you wish, dear. He is absolutely trustworthy," she answered.

With a smile and a wave of her hand Miss Howard walked quickly away.

CHAPTER X

LORD LESTER'S ADVICE

MAJOR CARLTON was enjoying one of his little week-end shooting parties. Only eight guns made up of four brother officers, himself and three neighbors. There were sixteen people stopping in the house altogether, the number Claude considered just right. Not a crowd; yet enough to amuse one another.

They had enjoyed excellent sport on Saturday, and now a bright October Sunday intervened. The shooting was to be renewed on Monday, and on Tuesday most of the guests would depart. It was Claude's last week of leave, and he was due back with his regiment on Saturday week. That morning the mother and son had conveyed several of their guests to church, amongst others Lord Lester.

Lord Lester was a man who had achieved European fame, not indeed because of his own gifts, but because of his untiring interest in the gifts of others. He had been a diplomat by profession, but temperamentally he was so utterly unsuited to any work which necessitated holding his tongue, that after a short and hot career he retired into private freedom again, and gave free rein to his natural verbosity. He was as well known in certain European capitals as he was in London; he rarely saw the interior of the Lords, and never made a public speech that he could possibly

avoid. He had never written anything but a couple of volumes of very indiscreet reminiscences, and he knew the histories, public and private, of half the celebrated males and females in Europe. His memory was well nigh perfect, upon the particular subjects which really interested him.

The Carltons were renowned in pre-war days for "doing" their guests very well. They had now reconstructed on the old lines. There had been the usual admirable breakfast served from nine to ten o'clock, and the usual groaning board at one-thirty luncheon. After which the party had split up and gone their different ways to work off the consequences of heavy indulgence, and prepare itself for afternoon tea and eight o'clock dinner. It was towards half-past three that Claude, strolling alone on the terrace, came upon his uncle doing likewise. As usual Lester was perfectly turned out. He was a very tall, extremely thin man, who gave the impression of being strung on live wires. He was rarely quiet for more than five minutes at a time, and rarely remained in one house for longer than three days. He hated being alone, and ran up to his nephew with palpable relief.

"Ah! my boy! This is opportune," he exclaimed, linking his arm in Claude's. "You're game for a walk, aren't you? We've had no exercise to-day, and we've got dinner looming ahead. By the way, how excellent that *homard à la crème* was at lunch. Hope you'll stick to this cook, she's a ripper. The smoking-room's full of lazy devils snoring disgustingly, and the women have all gone to scratch the pig's back with your mother. I wish we were all as ready to die as your Tamworths. The fact is, Claudie, I want to make a call."

"A call!" echoed his nephew blankly. "Who the deuce do you want to call upon?"

"Mrs. Davenant," returned Lester with a confidential drop in his voice.

"You know her, then, do you?" exclaimed Carlton, with surprise and interest.

"I believe I've met her. I recognized her in church this morning. Wonderful how one meets people in the most out-of-the-way unexpected places. One of the most beautiful women I ever knew, I rescued out of a leaking boat on the Danube. We were both quite alone. I've no doubt Mrs. Davenant will remember me, besides she's tenant of your Dower House, and I was your guardian. I really think it would be only civil to call."

Claude required no pressing, but he smiled inwardly at the feebleness of the excuses.

"Right you are! Let's start at once," he answered; and with one accord they turned, and made for the short cut across the fields to Little Glentworth.

"I didn't mention to your mother my desire to visit those two ladies," Lester went on to confide to his nephew, as they walked briskly along. "I thought it better not, until I had formed an opinion of my own. I didn't detect any particular signs of enthusiasm when I referred to the presence of Mrs. Davenant and her friend in church. I didn't pursue the subject, recollecting that I had no personal impression to fall back upon. I hope to be able to speak of them in future as everything that is delightful and correct."

"You met them in London, I suppose," hazarded Claude, who was secretly irritated by the tinge of doubt conveyed in his uncle's voice. He did not know that Lester was given to assuming that he knew every

one, till events proved the contrary, and that he then formed a new friendship on discovering it was not an old one.

"Somewhere in town. I really forget where, for the moment," he muttered vaguely; "but, of course, Mrs. Davenant was a well-known figure in a certain clique of London society. Not, be it understood, in our real old aristocracy, but in that delightful suburb of the old, where extremes meet, and where the pace is often a little too hot to last. I think also, I remember her at Marienbad, or was it Karlsbad? I really forget. You are satisfied with her as a neighbor?"

"I find both ladies delightful. I also had heard of the beautiful Mrs. Davenant in London, but I never chanced to meet her. She and my mother seem to hit it off all right together."

"Sibyl would," retorted Lester dogmatically. "She is a thoroughly sensible woman, and doesn't concern herself with the private affairs of others. I suppose Mrs. Davenant has never mentioned her late husband to you?"

"Never! Why should she?"

"Why, indeed, dear boy. There is probably every reason why she should not. Mrs. Davenant arrived in London a certain number of years ago with what I might call a Near-Eastern reputation. No one knew her except through having met her in fashionable Continental resorts. The Continental watering-places where one encounters delightful English people, with whom one soon becomes intimate if one is rich, and who express the hope of meeting again in London. From such beginnings the beautiful Mrs. Davenant picked up quite a respectable circle when she arrived in London, and settled down in the West End before

the war. No doubt she formed an inner circle for her own amusement, that is very simply arranged, but up to now she has preserved a certain bulwark of stark respectability, upon which she could always fall back. That interests me. It shows cleverness. Such bulwarks are becoming very thin, owing to constant encroachments from without. They are like our old sea walls, constantly crumbling. Now, one may say, they are down."

Carlton did not reply. He was conscious of a strong resentment rising within him.

Why the deuce did every one hint at some mystery connected with Mrs. Davenant? Probably the only reason why she didn't mention her husband was because he had been a damned blackguard, and her only desire was to forget him. Though his mind was constantly occupied with other things the memory of Mrs. Davenant at odd moments had been frequently shining through at him, and he was conscious of an interest in her which surprised him, and which he tried to stifle.

He contrived to divert Lester's attention from the controversial subject until they came in sight of Little Glentworth, lying sleepily silent in the blaze of a red October sunset. In another five minutes they found themselves being ushered into the drawing-room, and into the presence of both ladies.

Mrs. Davenant was seated in the window, a yellow-backed novel in her hand. Miss Howard was frankly sleeping on the sofa. She moved slowly into a sitting posture, in no way disturbed at being caught napping, whilst Mrs. Davenant rose to receive her guests with her flashing smile and air of charming cordiality.

"What energy!" she exclaimed. "Church in the

morning, and a two-mile walk in the afternoon. Do sit down, Lord Lester. You say we've met before. That is very probable. Where was it? At Homburg? Every one used to meet there."

Lester had sunk into the depths of an armchair beside that of his hostess.

"Yes! at Homburg. Of course I instantly recognized you in church this morning, and I said to myself, 'Bless my soul, surely that's the beautiful Mrs. Davenant?' Of course I knew that a lady of that name had taken Little Glentworth, but I had not realized that it was *the* Mrs. Davenant. The worst of meeting a beautiful woman is that one forgets all about the circumstances in the vividness of the fact. So you've actually settled down in the depths of the country. Dear me, what a change to be sure!"

"It's a very happy change," Mrs. Davenant assured him. "Both of us were getting rather bored by town life. Everything is made so very unpleasant now, what with the food scrimmage and the constant labor troubles, and here we've no feeling of being buried. One can always get away. I delight in Little Glentworth and all its surroundings."

Lester glanced round him carelessly; as a matter of fact, nothing his eye lit upon remained unnoticed.

"Unfortunately one must live somewhere. I try hard to live nowhere. I prefer to be *sur la branche*, but my sister, who is supposed to keep house for me, likes a settled habitation, which I return to at intervals."

Meanwhile Carlton had settled down to make himself agreeable to Miss Howard, and he did not fail to remark, as she sat up rather languidly on the sofa, that the curves of her figure were exceedingly grace-

ful, and her welcome as cordial as that of Mrs. Davenant, only more subdued and ethereal. She was indeed a very striking-looking woman, and instinct with a graciousness which showed itself in every movement, and focused itself in her dark intelligent eyes, whilst her voice had a pathetic note in it which vibrated with sympathy.

"I want to hear about yesterday," she said. "We thought of you all lunching out—the day was so beautiful. It was awfully kind of you and Mrs. Carlton to ask us to join you, but that sort of thing is hardly in our line, and we always think outsiders are looked on rather as intruders by a house-party."

"I don't think either you or Mrs. Davenant are ever likely to be looked upon in that light," he answered. "We had a ripping day's sport, and we lunched in a shed erected for the purpose in a field. The weather was ideal, we were very cheery, it was a good wind-up to my leave. I am off this week."

"But you'll return again shortly?"

"I'll get Christmas leave," he told her. "Probably I'll get back about the 12th of December. We generally finish off the pheasants then, and I do a bit of hunting."

"You'll be here for Christmas?" he added.

Miss Howard nodded. "Hilda seems so enamored of this place that she has no desire to go away anywhere. Perhaps, when February comes she'll get her usual longing for the Riviera. I'm sure I shall."

"Let's all do a month together at Monte," he suggested suddenly. "I generally run out there about March or for Easter."

"That would be delightful," she agreed. "By then,

traveling will be cleaner, and things in general may have settled down."

He shrugged. "Things won't settle down again in our lifetime, Miss Howard. But here one can live in tolerable comfort. I blot out the last five years, and try to revert to 1914."

He felt his imagination stirring, as it always did in the presence of those two women. They somehow suggested to his mind the movements of gay crowds, lamp-lit gardens, shady nooks with blazing sunshine beyond, a blue sea, and snowy villas nestling amid olives. The wild oats of his early youth seemed to flourish afresh, whilst all the time he talked trivialities about the neighborhood and his coming absence, and watched the evening light fall on Agnes Howard's slim hands and graceful form.

But attractive as she was the room held a still greater attraction for Major Carlton. As he was beginning to think the visit was rather a waste of time, and as he was about to consult his watch, the conversation became general. He caught the eye of Mrs. Davenant, who threw him a very bright glance of encouragement.

"Lord Lester is a mine of reminiscences," she said.

Lester gave a modest disclaimer with his hands. "Oh! I keep my eyes and ears open, and everything that concerns my fellow creatures interests me. I was just about to tell Mrs. Davenant of a most amusing supper party we had last week. We sat down twenty, and every one of us had been in prison."

"I never heard that you had done time," laughed Carlton.

"I confess I was rather a fraud amongst genuine cases," admitted Lester. "I heard of the party being

arranged by an old friend of mine, Mrs. Jessop, old Gladbrooke's daughter. She used always to be in and out of prison in 1913 and 1914, where prison was the rage. I wished to go to the party, but the only claim I had was the fact that I had been arrested in Petrograd, in mistake for a well-known anarchist, and did twenty-four hours in 'Peter and Paul' till our Embassy got going. I mentioned the incident in my book, 'The Indiscretions of a Diplomat.' All the other guests had an intimate acquaintance with English prisons, and their antediluvian methods. There was Lady Penrose. She had six weeks for throwing squibs into letter boxes, and burning all the housemaids' love letters. Then Willie Waters was there. He had done six months for leading a mob down Piccadilly, and looting all the shops on the way."

"How one forgets," laughed Carlton during a pause in which Lester recovered his breath. "I remember now. He's been a Cabinet Minister since."

"White-washed and warranted highly respectable," went on Lester. "Then Galen Orchard was there. He's one of those Irish chaps, always in and out of prison, a regular gaol-bird and a most charming fellow. One of our greatest classical scholars. He brought with him that very handsome Mrs. O'Connell, who's such a revolutionary. She's had at least two husbands shot. Then, by the way, Lady Mary Allen came. She's a connection of mine. She got three months as Mary Brown, but they found out she was an earl's daughter, and chucked her out after a week or two. Finch, M.P., was another guest. He was once sentenced to be hanged, but he continued somehow or other to escape, and now he's in sanctuary at Westminster. To crown the evening's entertainment Lady

Coleman was carried in on a stretcher decorated with suffragette ribbons. She was got up to look as if she'd just been released from a hunger strike, under the cat and mouse bill."

"Those thrilling days seem very far removed from our present conditions," said Mrs. Davenant.

"But we'd never have gained the vote without them," chimed in Miss Howard.

Lester shrugged his shoulders. "All those topsyturvy incidents made London so much more amusing than it is now. Men home from Russia say they've seen nothing so Bolshevist as London. It has all the appearance of being the capital of a nation that has gone crazy from Bolshevist rabies. The restaurants are merely banditti strongholds. The busmen are frenzied corsairs in charge of juggernauts. The shop girls are replicas of the women of the French Revolution. Even the dustmen are terrorists. Ah! I often sigh for Victorian days. After King Edward's death I feared we would all become too good to live. We were threatened by a most painful wave of puritanism, but all sorts of thrilling novelties cropped up and saved us."

"The women, for instance," suggested Mrs. Davenant. "You find now that you can't generalize about our sex. That's their charm, Lord Lester. Each is a law to herself, and they have such wonderful recuperative powers. In their youth they pass through the most appalling tragedies, which by middle age have become mere mirages draped in heliotrope memories."

Lester watched her sharply, then laughed. "Yes, yes! We owe the suffragettes a debt for presenting us with new sensations. I was never in favor of suppressing them. Certainly woman's day has dawned,

and now the House of Commons has decided to be funny, and has dropped its absurd pose of pompous superiority we are getting along much better. I always say we're all right as long as we have a government that makes no attempt to govern."

"You'll stop to tea?" asked Mrs. Davenant, seeing that Carlton had risen, and was trying to arrest his uncle's verbosity by laying a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"I fear we can't to-day, thanks! I must be getting home to my guests," he answered, his thoughts busy with her beauty and charm of manner. He held the hand she gave him lingeringly. "I was very disappointed about yesterday," he found himself saying, with a sort of unconscious shyness. Then, hearing Lester talking volubly to Miss Howard, he added in a low voice, "it made all the difference to my day."

She seemed not to hear his last words. Her tones were merely kind and friendly.

"Ah! but even if we had come we shouldn't have had many words with you. I know what real business those shoots are—no lingering behind after lunch on those short afternoons. The host is always more or less pre-occupied."

He shook his head dissentingly. "I may come to say good-by? I'm off at the end of next week."

"Why, of course! Come when you like. We shall miss you when you go," she said.

During the walk home Lester monopolized the whole of the conversation. Carlton listened, and smoked one cigarette after another in moody silence. His uncle was sentimental and cynical by turns, as was his wont.

"Perfectly charming and undoubtedly lovely.

Makes one realize how many pretty women there are, and how very few lovely ones. Mysterious! Yes, my boy, that's undoubtedly where the real charm lies, in the mystery of her. I can remember, in the good old days, one winter at Nice, a lot of us were held there for months by one veiled woman—she was American, and went everywhere, but no one ever saw her face unveiled. We sat in her opera box, we played bridge and *trente et quarante* alongside her, we danced with her—she had a divine figure, but not one of us ever saw her face. One chap bet a thousand guineas to one he'd unveil her in a week—he lost his money. Probably she was hideous, but she was the rage, because it got rumored about she was so lovely no man could look upon her and live. She had a husband, by the way, and he managed to survive. Who is Mrs. Davenant? What is she? What's her game? Has she had a sickener of conquests, and come here to find something easy to practice upon, just to keep her hand in? One doesn't meet with such beauty every day, certainly not hidden away in the country. That adds to the mystery. Now, if she's really a widow, why hasn't she made a brilliant second marriage?"

Lester paused for the first time to get his second wind. He seemed to expect an answer to his numerous questions.

"How the devil should I know?" was Claude's rather sulky retort.

Lester noted the hardly suppressed irritation, and proceeded to rub it in relentlessly.

"One can see at once that she's had any amount of experience, and the terms of experience are invariably very high. Damned old usurer, experience is! She's kept young, so clearly her life's been a success.

She seems to have settled down, which, as a rule, requires the deuce of a settling up, and she's the type of woman who could make any man under and over forty a doddering imbecile. I don't mean that every man would lose his heart to her. I mean that most men would lose their heads over her, a very different matter."

Carlton thought of the smile he had caught Lester bestowing upon the lady in question. It was the smile with which certain men will always smile at something lovely, whether their wives approve or not.

"I was always a free lance," went on Uncle Lester in lingering and sentimental tones, "simply because I was clever enough to recognize my own limitations. I have always considered marriage as a most difficult profession, for which one ought to have a stiff apprenticeship. The great thing is not to expect more of marriage than there is in it. Some one must get the worst of every bargain. It is absurd to rush into so very complicated an adventure without any preliminary training. That is why women on marrying must always submit to guidance. They haven't had our advantages."

"Looks as if a widow might not be such a bad investment," struck in Carlton with dry humor.

For just a second Lester was nonplussed. "Widows are charming," he conceded readily, "but widowhood has become such a vocation. It's quite overdone. And they all begin by refusing in the same words the man who proposes to them—'No, thanks! I know when I'm well off, a most painful beginning. I believe I did hear of one variation. 'Once bit, twice shy,' equally offensive, I consider. Widows as wives have two serious drawbacks. You've always to keep in active competi-

tion with defunct number one, and widows are so devilish independent. Directly a woman knows the ropes she's off down the course with the bit between her teeth. Widows are never domesticated. My contention is that no women, not even charwomen, are domesticated. We liked, in Victorian days, to pretend they were, but the death struggle going on, drawing-room versus servants' hall, has exposed the fallacy. If I were a woman—I put it to you, dear boy—should we enjoy having babies, and depending for our orgies on the linen cupboards and store-room?"

"No, you bet we wouldn't," laughed Carlton. "I do sometimes remember that it must be rather a bore for women always to be thinking of how they can best feed us. Women themselves don't care a damn what they eat."

"They seem to share with the Zoo bears a passion for buns, so I've been told," agreed Lester, then conscious that he had not quite accomplished his original intentions, he dashed off again on to the subject of matrimony.

"No man, if he wishes to keep young, should dream of marriage before he's forty. He should be contented till then with other men's wives. They'll teach him what marriage means, and always remember that a reputation for success in love is a tremendous asset with women. They tumble to it like nothing else. Of course to be a lover and husband combined is a fine art, which few acquire, but there you are! Lovers are born, not made. A born lover has his own methods of making love. He treats the art with the respect it deserves. He studies his part, taking into consideration his personal appearance, his staying

powers, etc. For instance, a man of my build, and the short, stubby, thick-set man should make love in totally different ways. I could always rush an affair, with a fair chance of success. The short, stubby chap has to plod. His hope of success would lie in dogged perseverance, and a stubborn wearing down of opposition, but he gets there, if only he can stay the course."

Carlton laughed rather grimly. He was getting rather bored by the veiled lecture.

"I'll remember all your tips, if ever the day does come when I contemplate matrimony," he said drily.

"Oh! you!" Lester waved an airy hand. "Of course I spotted at once that you weren't running in any matrimonial stakes when you left the Dower House."

Carlton turned sharply round and stared at the speaker. "By Jove!" he exclaimed, "how extraordinary. I simply never thought of that before."

Lester's eyes followed a covey of partridges; he said nothing.

Later on that evening Lester seated himself beside Mrs. Carlton and Mrs. Hall at the far end of the long drawing-room. The rest of the party were out of ear-shot, chattering in groups together around the bright wood fire. No card games were ever played on Sunday at Great Glentworth, but often a neighbor or two drove over to dine in a friendly, unceremonious fashion.

Captain Hall was really too vigorous a sportsman to dine out on any other day but Sunday. He was inclined to be sleepy and tired after many hours passed in the open air in hard exercise. Saidie enjoyed those informal evenings. She enjoyed showing off her

latest Parisian novelties to the house party, and Mrs. Carlton was always such a splendid foil in her evening uniform of black velvet, high to the throat and cut on the severest lines. Even the magnificent diamond cross upon her breast failed to detract from the strictly masculine appearance she affected, and which somehow suited her as no other style of dress could or would.

"Did Claudie tell you where we went this afternoon?" asked Lester, drawing up a low chair close to the two women.

Mrs. Carlton put her glass in one eye and answered, "No. Where did you go?"

"To call on Mrs. Davenant."

For a moment she answered nothing, and Mrs. Hall struck in. "I like Mrs. Davenant, but I've told Jim pretty plainly that I won't have any fooling around in that quarter. There's no real harm in Jim, but folks might think there was, if he got into the habit of always dropping in at Little Glentworth, just as some men drop into every inn they pass. Though I like her, I think she's dangerous."

Mrs. Carlton seemed to have been thinking hard, and Lester guessed her thoughts. She sat with her close-cropped head slightly bent, and her thin brown fingers mechanically smoothing her black velvet lap.

"I've an impression, though I've really nothing to go on, that it would be useless for any man to fall in love with Mrs. Davenant, because she isn't free."

Lester grinned. "Oh! my dear Sibyl, what an argument," he expostulated. "As a matter of fact, to love some one you've no right to love is by far the most enthralling love of all. It adds more guilt to the gingerbread than anything else I know. As a bachelor

I can speak from experience. Certainly, if you are right in your supposition, we may safely place the lady outside the danger zone, but I shouldn't say it would be useless for any man to fall in love with her owing to the reason you suggest. Women who are unattainable have an enormous attraction."

"But if one were only certain that no man could marry her——" suggested Mrs. Carlton with unconcealed anxiety.

"Ah! If! Of course there are lots of men who will simply do anything for a woman, except marry her. Conceivably that may be why the lady in question remains a widow."

Mrs. Carlton smiled incredulously, and silently shook her head.

"She prefers men to women. She's practically said so!" resumed Saidie with a certain warmth. "Oh! I know men are under the ridiculous delusion that women can't admire one another. That's pure nonsense. The truth is we don't always believe that a beautiful face implies a beautiful nature. Mrs. Davenant's got one of those intensely feminine faces that add so much to beauty of feature. They cause a man to realize the strong contrast between the sexes."

"God be praised," ejaculated Lester piously. "Helps one to bear with this new gender that the war has produced. Mrs. Davenant's all right for women, but I maintain she's dangerous for men."

"I think, Saidie, Mrs. Davenant's openly expressed devotion to men was intended as a warning," said Mrs. Carlton, speaking very deliberately. "It was meant as a warning to women to keep away. She doesn't want any of us about her. We might find out something."

"She may only have divorced her husband," suggested Mrs. Hall, but Lester shook his head.

"Only ugly women are so recklessly improvident," he declared seriously. "Foolish creatures, they never think of how their men are to be replaced. Where does Mrs. Davenant get her money from?"

"Ask me another," laughed Saidie.

"Why does no one ever discuss Miss Howard? She's quite as mysterious as the other, and a very handsome woman," mused Mrs. Carlton aloud.

"I hear the Vicar's enormously attracted in that quarter," struck in Mrs. Hall, maliciously. "He admires them both because they don't jazz."

Lester looked serious. "I approve of the clergy marrying. Though rather out of date as husbands they make most useful relations. I remember they used to be fashionable as husbands in the old Queen's reign, at least the muscular Christian type were, but I've never heard that they'd come in again. Shouldn't wonder if there was an after-the-war boom in them now."

"What are you three discussing so mysteriously?" demanded Claude, who had strolled up to them unperceived.

"Family affairs, dear boy, and the decay of religious observance in the stately homes of England," rapped out Lester flippantly.

CHAPTER XI

CLAUDE CARLTON MAKES A DISCOVERY

“**M**AJOR CARLTON,” announced the butler. Claude, as he passed through the doorway, caught a general impression of a very exhausted lady lying back with closed eyes before a tea table.

“May I come in?” he asked pausing involuntarily.

He saw her open her eyes, and raise her head with a little start.

“Yes, please do.”

The expression of weariness and intense sadness vanished. Even as their eyes met that expression had passed into a flashing smile of welcome.

“I do hope I’m not disturbing you, that you’re not very tired. I’ve brought you some pheasants,” he apologized.

“How very kind of you. Do come and sit down and have some tea. I’ve not begun yet, in fact I’ve just come in.”

She slipped off her loose glove, and held out her bare hand.

“Don’t dwell upon my personal appearance too critically. I’ve been for a long walk and regular scramble.”

“So I perceive,” he rejoined in his quiet voice. “How have you scratched your wrist so badly?” He

did not release her hand but turned it round, palm upwards.

She looked down on it and laughed. "Entirely self-inflicted. I can't own up to any desperate encounter, Major Carlton. You may tie that handkerchief round it if you like."

In his unembarrassed way he knotted the wisp of cambric she gave him. "Thanks! that looks much more respectable." She sat down again and began to pour out the tea, and in the half light of the dying day he looked at her more closely. Her face, so tired and pale, was at variance with her gay air.

"I'm sure you ought to go and rest. Where have you been?" he asked, tactfully taking no outward note of the fact that her skirt was liberally sprinkled with burrs and thorns.

"Over the fields and stiles, and ditches and through innumerable hedges. As a matter of fact, I'm not in the least tired. I'm a splendid walker, and as to sleep!"

She raised her beautiful eyes dramatically to the ceiling.

"I sleep here like the dead, until the last trump, in the form of my maid with early tea, recalls me to this mundane sphere once more. I hadn't slept properly for years until I came here. I used to keep awake on what I'd done, now I sleep on what I'm going to do."

She heaved a contented little sigh, and began to nibble a piece of cake.

"That's the best news I've heard for a long time. It means you'll stay on here," he exclaimed with a touch of eagerness.

"Probably, till I'm turned out," she answered.

For a second he did not gather her meaning, then he remembered she had taken the Dower House.

"That's a contingency we needn't trouble to consider." As their eyes met he caught once more a reflection of that mental pain and weariness he had seen when entering a few minutes before.

He told himself, in the brief silence that fell between them, that there was something curiously incongruous in this woman. At moments, she gave the impression of a light-hearted mondaine who had no thoughts beyond her own beauty and the comfort of her surroundings. Yet he could not help feeling the certainty that she had been through the mill, as he expressed it. She had done some rough traveling in her day, and her cheery light-heartedness suggested to him a great reserve of courage.

"I'm sorry I've got to return so soon to town."

"So am I," she agreed promptly, smiling back at him. "We shall have to depend for our male society upon Mr. Warburton, Colonel Webb, and Captain Hall. Probably I'll run up for a week's shopping before Christmas. Perhaps London won't be so horrid by then, but I hear people have begun economizing again in everything but lovers."

She gave him a very frank opinion of London. She had sold her town house and hated hotels, and in such times, however kind people were, it was not really kind to pay visits. Then there was always a coal crisis or a butter famine. Taxis would only come out at night to take jazzing ladies to balls at five pounds a head. Dressmakers were now blatant thieves of the first water, and in town no kind Samaritan called with home grown pheasants, to ease the monotony of Chi-

nese fowls and three-years-dead Australian mutton.

She smiled her thanks again at him, her blue eyes full of sparkling gratitude.

"I'm most awfully pleased that some one appreciates the old rocketers. I'll see you're kept supplied whilst I'm away. We get a few woodcock, too, and an occasional bunny might come in handy in these times of stress," he promised her. "The kitchen garden here was always a good one, and we've always managed to keep a few of the houses going. My tenants must not want for anything in this land of plenty. Country folks have had a big pull over town folk during the last five years. You were wise to chuck the town, Mrs. Davenant."

"I've proved that already up to the hilt," she agreed, "though your reasons for saying so sound rather greedy. Agnes says that when rationing came in, little Mary became the most important personage in the kingdom."

Her gayety was infectious, it made him smile. What spirits she had! Here was the cheery chatter of a woman who hadn't a care in the world. There was no trace left of the pale, weary woman whom he had surprised on his arrival. He dwelt mentally upon that fleeting impression. He would not so greatly admire her pluck had he not also seen that momentary desolation of sadness.

"Do tell me the latest county scandal!" she demanded.

He shook his head. "For the time being there is actually none that I've heard. We all seem to be behaving pretty well. I've been too overcome by Lester's town yarns to pay much attention to the neigh-

borhood. By the way! What about the Lake House? Have you begun to unravel that mystery? I hear young Thorpe's been staying at the White Hart. Is old Thorpe's niece still with him?"

She glanced up quickly. "She is. I saw her only yesterday. Don't you know Harry Thorpe?"

He felt the sensation of being challenged. "No, we've never happened to come across one another," he replied indifferently. "We dropped the Lake House as a going concern years ago. You know him?"

She nodded. "Yes! We've met, and I like him enormously. He will be a great acquisition when he steps into his kinsman's shoes. It's rather hard on him to be dropped because of his relative's peculiarities."

He was puzzled by her championship. "If I chance to be on leave I'll look him up when he comes down here again. I said a moment ago that I'd heard no scandal. I forgot about young Thorpe. He and Miss Thorne are said to be deeply interested in one another, if not absolutely engaged. As you seem so interested in them, perhaps you've already heard this tit-bit?"

She ignored his query, "That's a delightful tit-bit," she exclaimed. "Oh! I do hope it's true."

"But why on earth should you be so keen?" he persisted, struck by the ring of actual enthusiasm in her voice.

"Firstly, because it's romance, and I adore romance. Secondly, they're young and I'm so horribly tired of old age. For five long years the old have had the time of their lives. Now, I'd like to see them all buried, and youth come into its own and rule the world, as it should."

He laughed with quiet enjoyment. "I'm absolutely

with you. I'd bury the House of Commons first. Worse luck we've got a Government that defies everything, even the tooth of time. So you're keen on romance!"

"Rather! I'm keener on romance than on anything else. Why! it's the only thing worth living for."

"How would you define it?"

"Something one hasn't the slightest right to. That's what makes it so heavenly. Real romance must never be obvious. It must always be *sub rosa*."

"Not so fast, please," he raised a protesting hand. "I've got to assimilate that. *Sub rosa* sounds, well—dangerous. Would you call marriage romance?"

She looked reflectively out of the window on the autumn glory of a herbaceous border.

"Some one has to get the worst of every bargain, and isn't that all marriage is?" She spoke as if to herself, then she turned and looked at him. "Of course it so much depends. I've always believed that the ideal husband dwells only in the imagination of the woman who never had one. A first marriage is hardly ever a romance, a second marriage conceivably might be."

He laughed ironically. "On the whole you evidently don't think much of matrimony, Mrs. Davenant."

She shrugged her shoulders smilingly. Her voice was dry.

"I'm rather inclined to take heaven's view. It isn't thought much of in the other world. It's a thing that's not done there. It was the only thing the Government forgot to make compulsory, a deprivation they forgot to popularize."

He wondered many things as he smiled at her cynical little quips. What could her history be? he asked himself for the hundredth time, for though he would deny it strenuously to others he was convinced in his mind that she had left a stormy past behind her. Suddenly he thought of something.

"Won't you and Miss Howard dine with us on Friday night, the night before I go?" he asked. "Only a small party, Lester goes to town with me, and the Halls and Warburtons will dine with us. My mother will, of course, send you the conventional note, but do promise me now that you'll come."

She flashed her charming smile upon him. "Thanks ever so much. We will be delighted, and pray tell Mrs. Carlton not to bother about writing. Conventionalities bore me, as you may already have discovered. We'll be with you on Friday at eight o'clock."

"That's ripping. Thanks awfully," he answered, meaning every word he said. "Now I'll take myself off, and leave you to have a rest."

When Hilda Davenant heard his retreating steps on the gravel she lay back in her chair and closed her eyes.

"I think he's warned off, but one never can tell," she murmured below her breath. A clock struck six, the room was full of shadow, the silence of the house was profound. Memories had rushed upon her ruthlessly that afternoon. They flooded in on her now. Her vision of the old black and white Lake House had roused in her unbidden recollections, which tested her courage to the utmost. There were connected with it certain facts in her life which held a sudden terror for her. Then that hard-won fight of hers through long years came back to her. Up to now she had won out.

Why should the future hold more fears than the past had done, and there was always Agnes—the steadfast friendship of Agnes Howard. The thought brought a glow of comfort to her, and she rose and gathered up her gloves.

She smiled suddenly. "I'll go and have a bath. I believe all the greatest thoughts in this world are first conceived in a hot tub."

Carlton mounted his horse in the stable-yard and rode slowly away through the twilight towards home. His thoughts were full of the woman he had just left, and he now frankly acknowledged to himself that she meant more to him than any other woman he'd ever met.

Yet the shadow of non-possum was over him and sobered his ardor. Before he had even seen her mystery had enveloped her, and the constant hints of some hidden secret in her life had colored his thoughts, damped his spirit and restrained his impulses. Was she, or was she not, free to re-marry? The latter somehow seemed the likelier possibility. Why, he could hardly have told. It might be that he was saturated with the hinted and half-expressed beliefs of others. A husband in the background was the most generally accepted and propounded theory. Tragedy seemed to dog the steps of great beauties in history, and all the world over, and always their beauty seemed to stop short of giving them their hearts' desire. Sadness, solitude, poverty was so often their bitter portion at last. His friendship with Mrs. Davenant seemed to bring home to Claude Carlton the tragedy of the professional beauty's life. The standard of living was not for her as for her less lovely sister. Her actions were always in the limelight, and invested with strong

significance. Her slanderers multiplied in ratio with her lovers, and no one ever remembered that no great beauty was ever half so good, or half so bad as she was painted by hand or by God. It came to Carlton that where such women failed was in their mental power to store in waiting a substitute for the beauty filched by time. Their unwillingness to ring down the curtain on physical fascinations, and ring up a curtain on mental attractions brought infinite tragedy to those whose day was done. They clung to life's morning glory, and turned shudderingly aside from the mellow loveliness of eventide.

What Mrs. Davenport had chaffingly remarked about marriage might have been said as a warning to him. He had been vaguely conscious all the time that veiled beneath her light banter she had some definite purpose. How well versed she must be in warding off lovers! The beautiful Mrs. Davenant must have had them by the score.

Carlton told himself he cared nothing for her past. He would please himself in choosing a wife, and if Hilda Davenant was free he would let himself go for all he was worth, and win her if it was humanly possible. How was he to find out the truth? Only by asking her the question. At present that seemed the only way.

As he left his horse in the hands of his groom and struck off towards the house, he caught sight of his mother and Lester walking on ahead of him, and a smile broke over his grave face.

Accustomed as he was to the male attire Mrs. Carlton affected, her neat manliness caused him constant amusement.

This evening she was markedly more immaculate

than her companion. Her riding breeches were cut by a master hand. Her "tops" fitted to perfection, and the long coat she wore became her boyish slender lines. Her bowler hat had a single eyeglass screwed into its brim. Mrs. Carlton's white doeskins were unbuttoned. To-day no smart man buttons his gloves—such is the whim of the moment.

"Hullo!" shouted Claude lustily.

The pair stopped and waited. "Hullo! where have you been since tea-time? I saw 'the Guy' was out when we left our gees in the stable," inquired his mother.

"I took Mrs. Davenant some game and found her at home. She'd just returned from a long tramp. Seems she's a first-rate walker. By the way, whilst I remember, I've asked both ladies to dinner on Friday, and you might invite the Halls and the Warburtons, mother. Let's have a final burst before I go."

Mrs. Carlton smiled upon him. "Right you are, dear boy, and I'll also send a line to Mrs. Davenant."

"Thanks! but you needn't bother. She told me to tell you so," returned Claude, carelessly.

His mother made no remark. She accepted the fact that Claude was the autocrat of his own house, and his invitations sufficed in themselves.

"And how did you find your attractive neighbors?" inquired Lester, genially.

"Miss Howard wasn't there. Only Mrs. Davenant, and she looked rather tired I thought."

"But as beautiful as ever, I presume?"

Claude smiled. "Yes, that goes without saying. She is a beautiful woman."

Lester did not like the expression. He would rather Claude had called her "a topper" or something else

equally inelegant and indifferent. He'd even have borne without reproof the iniquitous "Top hole."

"By the way," he went on casually, and beginning to search in his pockets for something, "I got a letter yesterday. Was it yesterday? Yes! I think it was, from a Yankee chap whom I saw a lot of in Washington at one time. I wrote him a p.c. the other day, and asked him if he'd ever come across any one of the names of Mrs. Davenant and Miss Howard. I endeavored briefly to sketch with my feeble pen the personal charms of both ladies. I placed a hypothetical date at about twelve years ago."

"What on earth makes you think they lived in Washington?" exclaimed Carlton, frowning and tapping his leg impatiently with his crop. "They aren't Americans."

"Perhaps they aren't, but they ought to be," retorted Lester, inconsequentially. "Here is what my friend, Colonel Bellows, says in answer. I think there's just light enough to see. You understand this letter is written in American, not English, but doubtless you'll be able to translate enough of its meaning. Yes! here's the place—

"I guess this is some proposition, but I remember in the days when I was at a loose end, a pair of lady-birds in Washington. One was called Agnes Howard, but the other wasn't called Davenant, she was Hilda Lambert. No relation to each other. Agnes Howard was the very topmost straw on the swim in Washington, but the knowing ones were on to her because they said Brother Howard kept Mrs. Lambert, or whatever her name was, and she got away with most of his money when he died. Seems to me Hilda Lambert was a widow, but since this little old war my brain's

gone blank—absolutely, and maybe I've sent you a dud and been barking up the wrong tree. Henderson has just blown in, and we're off to have a bit of lunch at the Cri.'

"That's all, I think, upon that subject," remarked Lester, tranquilly, as he neatly folded up the letter and replaced it in his pocket. "Good chap, Bellows. They say he really was Wilson's right hand man in Paris, and according to the vernacular of the day he's a multi."

"What extraordinary language," exclaimed Mrs. Carlton, uneasily, as she began to walk on again.

Lester shrugged. "Not really more extraordinary than the English language has become. Bellows has a suite of rooms at the Ritz, but I gave up going there after being accosted three times in half an hour, with 'Glad to see you in the pink, old son!' It's quite possible Bellows is blowing, or is it barking up the wrong tree, as he euphemistically expresses it."

"Sounds a most unlikely connection with the ladies at Little Glentworth," exclaimed Claude, contemptuously. "Agnes Howard is quite a common name, so is Hilda Davenant or Lambert. Davenant's Irish, I fancy. However, their names are no concern of ours, and in themselves both ladies are charming."

"Quite charming," hastily and warmly agreed Lester. "What's in a name? No one ought to be christened till they're twenty-one. Names rarely fit their owners. Women called Fay and Daphne have faces like the Marble Arch, and always address you as if you were a public meeting. I've known of Marmadukes and Jaspars who have faces like gargoyles, who roar like bulls of Bashan under Reformer's Tree, and

dwell in suburban nests called Zepp Villa and Gotha Cottage. After all, my dear boy, we do make more allowances for human nature than we did twenty years ago. The exact difference between the saint and the sinner is one of temperamental degree. Temperament used to be the strict preserve of genius, now any one may have it and belong to quite a decent club."

Lord Lester became aware that his companions were not listening to a word he said. Mother and son were striding along on either side of him with lowered heads, apparently wrapped in their own thoughts. Lester never suffered inattention for long.

"You're right, Claude. You feel just as I do," he prattled on. "I like to know things instinctively. I dislike things explained. The big three, Press, Pulpit and Petticoat, never explain anything. The Press never explains who invents the pap it feeds us on. The Pulpit never explains how it knows all the things it says it knows. The Petticoat never explains what it is made to conceal. By the way, at the last Palace garden party the petticoats had come down an inch or two. In the good old rollicking days of the militant suffragettes it was all very well to shriek for woman's rights, but women are top dog now, and the women who really wear well are those who keep something to themselves, like the dear things at the Dower House."

"Lester! what are you talking about?" questioned Mrs. Carlton abruptly and very sharply.

"I wasn't talking. I was only rambling on to myself," he replied gently.

On reaching the house Claude strode away to his own quarters, and Lester, finding himself alone with Mrs. Carlton by the whip rack in the hall, whispered to her softly—

"I think we'll find that friend Bellows has hit both nails evenly on the head."

She made no answer, beyond a slight shrug of her shoulders, and went to her room. If "friend Bellows" was right—then Hilda Davenant was free to marry again.

CHAPTER XII

MRS. DAVENANT AT BAY

WHEN the ladies from Little Glentworth walked into the Carltons' library they found the rest of the party assembled, and a subdued hum of conversation was going on.

The family party had been augmented by the arrival of Lady Tadcaster, Mrs. Carlton's sister, and the Halls had brought two American guests, Major Griffith and Colonel Lycett. The little party had expanded into twelve persons, and as was her invariable habit Mrs. Carlton introduced the last comers to those unknown to them.

Claude Carlton had been standing up before the fire feeling curiously restless, until the door opened to admit the last of his guests. It was a fine moonlight night, and he had congratulated himself on the fact, as he looked out a few minutes previously from the windows upon the wide expanse of wooded park lands stretching down to the river. The roads would be good going for Mrs. Davenant's Rolls-Royce. Neither he nor his mother attempted to use the large drawing-room, even when receiving a number of guests. Claude said it looked chilly and unlived in, which in truth it was, and he preferred the spacious, stately proportions and comfortable aspect of the library, with its yawning fireplace, the rich clothing of beautiful bind-

ings lining its walls, giving it that air of completeness nothing can supply so satisfactorily as books. Palms, ferns, azaleas and camelias in full blow were grouped in dark corners. The room looked beautiful, as even Carlton himself had acknowledged when glancing around him.

As he stood up before the blazing logs waiting for the woman he was impatient to see, the butler announced, "Mrs. Davenant, Miss Howard," and he followed his mother down the room to welcome them.

He held Mrs. Davenant's hand, perhaps for a moment longer than was necessary, looking down on her with eyes eloquent in admiration, and she certainly was very good to look upon, with her starry eyes raised to his, her white skin shining like satin against the folds of her dark gown. Then he turned to greet Agnes Howard, brilliantly handsome in dark red velvet.

Mrs. Davenant passed down the long room by Mrs. Carlton's side, with that perfect grace and composure which characterized all her movements; shaking hands first with one then another of her acquaintances.

"I want to introduce to you Colonel Lycett and Major Griffith," said Mrs. Carlton.

Both men bowed low, and as they held out their hands they said—

"Very pleased to meet you."

"Very pleased to meet you."

A close observer might have noticed that on hearing this mode of address Mrs. Davenant paused involuntarily, and looked more attentively at both men, but Mrs. Carlton was saying—

"Now I want you to know my sister," and the two ladies passed on together.

Lady Tadcaster greeted Mrs. Davenant with great

cordiality. She was a widow of importance in her world, owning the unique reputation for never having compromised herself. The truth was, that being very plain no one would believe anything against her. Her female relations were always extremely affectionate to her, as her lord had left her the family pearls, and the power to will them to whom she pleased. It was maliciously said that she devoted herself to French novels and being rude to her relatives, but to the Carltons, mother and son, she was devoted, and she had contrived to reach Great Glentworth the night before, at her sister's earnest request.

"Well! how do you like settling down in the country?" she asked pleasantly, as she and Mrs. Davenant seated themselves side by side.

"Immensely! so far it's been a great rest cure."

Lady Tadcaster smiled wryly. "I can't say I've ever found that, because people insist on going to town to be amused, and going down to the country to be amusing."

"Town birds feel it incumbent upon them to disperse agricultural depression," supplemented Captain Hall, who had drawn a chair to their side, looking very much at home in his well-worn "pink."

"Personally I find rest and oblivion in a crowd," declared Tadcaster, "more especially if it is a musical crowd, when every one talks at once and no one ever says anything. I found the 'Peace' season the hardest I ever went through. We were always told that after the war everything would be different. Naturally we thought that meant things would be quieter and more subdued. The difference I found was in the wildly reckless expenditure, the wild desire for amusement of all sorts, and the prices willingly paid for all

luxuries. The gulf between Society and Labor was never more pronounced. The harder Labor struck, the harder Society jazzed and raced."

"Saidie says it reminds her of the insane spending of the San Franciscans when their insurance money was paid after the earthquake," remarked the Master.

"Come and have some dinner, Aunt Clara," said Carlton, offering his arm.

Captain Hall led in Mrs. Davenant, who found herself next one of the Americans at the round table. Mrs. Carlton faced her with Lester and Warburton on her right and left. The Master was in first-rate form.

"I'm in luck to-night," he told himself with a quiet chuckle, as he turned a beaming face on his companion.

"I say, what an awfully pretty frock you've got on. You don't mind my saying so, do you? What's it made of?"

"Satin brocade," answered Hilda. "I'm glad it meets with your approval."

"Suits you down to the ground," he declared, surveying the dark blue and gold triumph of a French artiste.

She colored slightly under his too obvious appreciation of her beauty, and indeed he thought her wonderfully attractive and lovely.

"I didn't dare hope I'd find myself seated next you," he half whispered. "What a thing it is in life, to be sure to find some one who never palls."

Mrs. Davenant laughed outright. "We hardly see enough of each other to tire, if such a thing were possible. How well your wife looks to-night."

The Master pulled himself up, and took the hint,

glancing round at Saidie who sat on one side of her host. She wore a white satin sheath that showed off her smart little figure. Diamonds sparkled in her hair and on her breast, where a knot of weird-looking orchids clustered.

"Yes! I suppose she is what one would call a smart-looking little lady," he conceded, "she's a rattling good sort too. I couldn't bear to be henpecked."

"Don't you think it entirely depends upon the hen?" suggested Hilda, with a gleam of mischief.

Hall grinned. "Perhaps it does," he conceded. "What's so clever about Saidie is she quite understands that to look pretty very nearly means I am pretty. I never cared much for big women, they look too much as if they could take care of themselves. That chap who took her in is a first-rate rider. He's got no end of trotters and chasers on his place in Virginia."

"An American?" inquired Mrs. Davenant casually. "I didn't catch his name when he was introduced."

"Lycett, Colonel Lycett. His town house is in Washington. He and Major Griffith only arrived this afternoon, so we brought them along. Good chaps, both of them. Don't tell you they won the war, and can cut off our bacon with a stroke of the pen."

"Old friends of Mrs. Hall's?" suggested Hilda.

The Master shook his head. "No, they brought letters from friends of hers, so we asked them down here for a few days."

Colonel Lycett was a tall, wiry, gray-haired man of about fifty, clean shaven and admirably groomed. Griffith was also clean shaven. He was the clear cut, fine featured type which is now so essentially American. He was seated on Mrs. Davenant's left, but so far he was immersed in conversation with Emily War-

burton, and she could not see him distinctly. Lady Tadcaster was chattering with Carlton.

"Griffith's got all sorts of rum opinions," whispered Hall, under cover of the buzz of conversation.

"What sort of rum opinions?" whispered back Hilda, suddenly interested.

"Oh! extraordinary opinions as to our having lived in a previous existence and astral bodies. I don't suppose you know what they mean any more than I do?"

He glanced across the table with a little laugh. "Did you ever sit at a dinner-table where they managed to keep off it?" he asked.

Mrs. Carlton was talking volubly, and leaning forward as she addressed Major Griffith.

"No, we haven't a ghost here, but there's said to be a good one in the neighborhood."

The whole table suddenly paused to listen.

"Where's that, Sibyl?" asked Lady Tadcaster.

"The Lake House. Old Mr. Thorpe's place."

"Thorpe! Thorpe! I once knew a Thorpe in Washington, who owned a place in England called the Lake House," broke in Major Griffith, abruptly.

"It was probably the same eccentric individual who lives near here," observed Mrs. Davenant, smiling suddenly round at him.

Griffith shook his head. "No, the man I mean is dead, and a good job too. He was an out and out rascal."

"But what about the Lake House Ghost?" broke in Colonel Lycett, impatiently.

"No one seems to know very much about it," laughed Carlton. "Mrs. Davenant proposed to investigate it. I don't know if she has made any progress."

"Keen as I am I'm afraid I've made none," she

answered. "I've never even passed the threshold."

She met the stern blue eyes of Lycett and held them for a moment, then Griffith again claimed her attention eagerly.

"I'm so glad to find so many British are keen," he exclaimed. "I wish you'd come over to us and put a little enthusiasm into Washington. We're all off on the wrong track there, but perhaps you know Washington already?"

"I've been there," replied Mrs. Davenant, "but many years ago. I cannot find out what is supposed to haunt the Lake House; no one seems to know."

"How clever," thought Lester, as he listened intently. "She's steered him clean off Washington, and she's never turned a hair."

As Mrs. Davenant confessed to having been in that city his eye had instinctively turned to Carlton, who was also listening. They had exchanged glances which were more hostile than friendly. Carlton's expression conveyed a contemptuous indifference to any proof, however strong or slender, against Mrs. Davenant's fair name.

Warburton had now joined in the conversation raging round ghosts, and the Americans evidently regarded him, for a parson, as rather an amazing proposition.

"First you must prove that the so-called dead actually leave us," he quietly remarked to Lady Tadcaster.

"What a very unpleasant suggestion," she retorted.

Warburton looked at her with perfect gravity, taking no note of the laughter echoing round the table.

"You'll agree, Lady Tadcaster, that I'm not here to minister to bodies, but to souls. Would you make

me out a disbeliever in the object to which I am professed? If souls do not exist in a post-mortem state then my labor is in vain. There is no sense in my ministry."

He spoke smilingly, but all could see that he was absolutely sincere.

"Our contention was not that souls cease to exist after death, but that they do not return to earth," insisted Lady Tadcaster. "We have no proof that they do return."

"We have no proof that they do not return," mildly insisted Warburton.

In the general laugh which followed the little duel, the conversation drifted off into other subjects. A sudden constraint had fallen upon Mrs. Davenant and she sat in dreamy silence, only half listening to the light little stream of remarks the Master trickled into her ear. She felt as if she had received warning to guard the secrets of her life even more closely than before.

"Yet if they knew every detail would I really care?" she asked herself in a weary disdain. "Is there one exception that I dread?" She glanced involuntarily at Carlton and their eyes met. He smiled at her, and she felt she needs must smile again.

Yet a thrill of apprehension ran through her. How unmistakable was that proud faith in his glance. He had heard something yet he trusted her. What had he heard?

When the women once more found themselves in the library, Hilda left Mrs. Carlton and Lady Tadcaster talking to the others by the fire, whilst she moved over to a sofa and seated herself by Emily Warburton. She had no desire to be drawn into the conversation

which had reverted back to ghosts. Every now and again a sentence or two was wafted over to her ears. Mrs. Hall was referring to the vicar—

"It's so bad for a man not to be absolutely normal, don't you think so?"

Hilda and Emily exchanged smiles. "By normal she means absolutely material. Ambrose never could be that," said his sister quietly.

The entrance of the men prevented their exploiting the subject further, and Carlton at once drew her to a far corner of the room to show her some old pottery which had just been dug up in a neighboring field.

"How beautiful your room looks to-night," she said, glancing away from him and round its spaciousness. She bent her head over some violets, and lifted their heads with her slender finger.

"Will you accept those from me?" he asked. He lifted a bunch of white violets from a glass, and dried their stalks with his handkerchief.

She took them at once without a trace of hesitation, and held them for a moment to her face.

"How good of you, Major Carlton. Of course I'm delighted to have them. How sweet they do smell."

She bent her head and placed them in a fold of her dress, where they lay against her breast, and he stood silently watching her, and thinking how beautiful was the setting of her head upon her lovely shoulders.

"I've not had a word with you yet, and I'm off to-morrow morning," he said, drawing up a chair under a bower of azaleas, and throwing himself down by her side. "Will you promise to let me know if you come up to town?"

"Why certainly," she responded. "Shall we do a play together?"

"Rather! two or three plays! That'll be ripping. You do promise to come, don't you—I mean to town?"

"I can't absolutely promise," she replied with a gay little smile, "I hate making plans. I love to act on the spur of the moment. Look upon it as a possibility, but not a certainty."

She saw his face fall. "It was all I had to look forward to," he said below his breath, but she caught the words.

"When do you return here?" she asked.

"Oh! not for ages. Not till the second week in December. How am I to live without seeing you till then?"

He bent down and looked into her eyes; there was something in his face she had never seen before, a new expression, but she knew the meaning of those tones in his voice.

She looked full at him with her soft speaking eyes. Her face was very grave, her voice very kind.

"Just as you lived before we ever met. I don't want to lose your friendship, Major Carlton." She rose as she spoke. "I fear you are forgetting your duties as host."

He jumped up instantly, and they moved across the room together, and as they passed Lady Tadcaster that lady detained her, and he mingled with his other guests.

When the last carriage had driven off, when Mrs. Davenant's motor had rushed away into the silence of the night, Claude Carlton retired to his own private den, and lighting a cigar gave himself up to thought. He had received a rebuff, but he did not acknowledge defeat.

Hilda Davenant might imagine him defeated, but

he was far from being hopeless. He did not believe in giving in, till he was absolutely compelled. It was in the nature of his temperament to be very slow in desire, but once desire was awakened, to be tenacious and fight to the death for what he really wanted. Carlton did what all men will do till the Day of Judgment. He made up his mind that he had found his mate, and he had no intentions of losing her again.

Meanwhile a little family circle conversed softly round the fire in the library. Lady Tadcaster was sipping her second cup of tea, and smoking her before-bed cigarette.

She spoke decisively and dogmatically. "There's not the faintest doubt as to his infatuation. The matter really resolves itself into this: Is she free to marry him or is she not?"

"You think it a certainty she will accept him if she is free?" questioned her sister anxiously.

"I think it so certain that I made a point of being extremely agreeable, almost affectionate to her. I always am very nice to pretty widows and pretty girls. One never knows who they will become."

"I'm not so sure, Clara," chimed in Lester, rubbing his thin hands up and down his long thin legs. "I'm inclined to think there's an impediment somewhere in the background. I tried to draw Lycett, but found him very uncommunicative. He didn't yield to my blandishments, though I spotted at once he could say a lot if he chose: 'What is that lady's name? I didn't catch it,' he asked, indicating Miss Howard. 'Miss Agnes Howard. She and Mrs. Davenant live together. I suppose before they came here they lived together in Washington,' I answered casually, and watched his face. Even his iron-gray mask wasn't proof against

the stunning surprise he felt. I caught him glancing at her in a curious puzzled way, several times during the evening."

Mrs. Carlton put down her teacup with a little clatter.

"Oh! I do so hate all this suspicion and prying," she exclaimed, rubbing up her monocle vigorously. "If only I could be sure that Claudie couldn't marry her I wouldn't care a straw what her past life had been. I'd gladly accept her for what she now appears to be, a gentlewoman, and a pleasant member of our little country circle."

Lester smiled grimly. "Of course we all know that a woman can change her character with her hat—after all, what are most heads?—merely hat pegs. I don't think you'll be kept long in suspense, Sibyl. I guess matters will very rapidly come to a head. I have rarely passed so interesting an evening. Women ought to be studied like meteorology; they're a distinct science, and, like the weather, of infinite variety; Claudie and the beautiful Mrs. Davenant; the Master trying to avoid his wife's gimlets, and making the running on his own account. Poor Warburton and the mysterious Agnes Howard. I really am very lucky; some people never meet anything interesting. They may found a new faith, and lead a forlorn hope without encountering a thrill, whilst I can't even take a taxi to Paddington without encountering matter enough for a Shilling Shocker."

"I never really feel well when nothing's going on," remarked Lady Tadcaster, sympathetically. "Men of to-day have a passion for celebrities, a sort of relentless hunting after notoriety. We've got so confused by the war that we're always doing the wrong thing

without knowing it, and knowing the right thing without doing it. The worst kind of women are always the most attractive. They take such pains over their nails and their eyebrows."

Mrs. Carlton got up hastily. "I'm going to bed. There's cubbing to-morrow morning, and it's just on midnight. Good-night, Clara. Lester, you'll see to the lights."

Lester closed the door and returned softly to the hearthrug.

"Poor Sibyl. She's got a rough time before her, I fear," he whispered as he lit a cigarette.

Lady Tadcaster shrugged her shoulders, and began to hunt for a shoe which had gone astray.

"Oh! I don't know. It may come all right. Mrs. Davenant gives me the impression of being self-made, and she's taken a lot of trouble over her work. The really hopeless people are those who have been made by some one else."

CHAPTER XIII

MUTUAL CONFESSION

“DON’T let us talk till we reach home.”

Hilda Davenant lay back in her luxurious seat, and closed her eyes, as the car ran swiftly down Great Glentworth avenue. Apparently Agnes Howard was equally disinclined for conversation, for she also drew back into her corner and was silent.

In the few minutes it took to complete the journey both brains worked hard at their different problems, which were complicated enough, and Hilda Davenant’s steps were almost weary as she led the way to the little boudoir adjoining her bedroom.

“You can go to bed, Marie, I won’t require you any more to-night,” she said to the maid, who stood at the dressing-table awaiting her. Then she shut the communicating door, and lit a cigarette. “I suppose we ought to talk over matters,” she said in a dull, indifferent voice.

Agnes made a gesture of irritation.

“Oh! I suppose so,” she echoed. “Let’s stir up the fire.” She threw on a log, and the two women faced each other. “But after all, Hilda, why should we? What can it really matter to you or to me?”

Mrs. Davenant shrugged indifferently, and drew forward a chair.

“Absolutely nothing at all,” she agreed, “but whilst

we are on the crest of the wave of a new crisis isn't it better to face it, dissect it, and decide our future procedure?" They looked straight into one another's eyes. "Agnes," went on Mrs. Davenant, "are you prepared to lay all your cards upon the table?"

For a second or two Miss Howard hesitated. She did not pretend to misunderstand the meaning of the question, and a faint color rose in her olive cheeks.

"Yes! Hilda! If you are prepared to do likewise," she replied quietly.

"Right! Then let us begin to arrange them in order. What are you going to do about Ambrose Warburton? What am I going to do about Claude Carlton? How much is Colonel Lycett going to reveal to the Halls? What does Carlton already suspect? How much does Griffith know?"

Agnes listened, staring meditatively into the fire. There was silence for a few minutes, then she spoke slowly, weighing each word that fell from her lips.

"Firstly, dear, I think we must eliminate any personal feelings. Both men must be discussed from a purely impersonal standpoint. We may accept the fact that Ambrose Warburton cares for me. He has not said so, but my experience in the past makes me certain of the present. He may never ask me to be his wife, believing that duty to his sister requires him to remain single. If he did propose to me then he would have to be told certain facts. How would they affect him? He and Emily know that once I was engaged to a man who left me for another woman, but they know nothing of the facts connected with my love affair—the facts that really matter, and that make our friendship so strange and yet so sacred."

Mrs. Davenant watched her attentively. A faint smile curved her lips.

"You see, dear," she said very gently, "we cannot eliminate the personal note. Ambrose would only need to be told facts in the event of your considering his offer of marriage. Would you, under normal circumstances, take that possibility into consideration?"

Again Miss Howard did not finish. "Yes, I would," she replied, candidly, "I suppose there is always in us the passion for the unattainable. The desire of the moth for the star. Incongruous as it may seem that I could contemplate becoming the wife of a country parson, Ambrose is intensely sympathetic to me. Even the life appeals to me, after all the buffeting I have been through in the past. I have sometimes dreamed that even yet I might drink of that love which was the ideal of the universal spirit, when women and men were first created. Having said so much, let us leave it at that, Hilda, so the question really doesn't arise."

There was no bitterness in her voice. It was quite cold and calm. Years ago she had made a certain choice, which she knew would in all probability militate most seriously against any future hopes of marriage.

"He is not going to be told by us, but he may be told by some one else," was Hilda's dry retort. "Lord Lester is hot foot on some scent, and Mrs. Carlton is uneasy enough to make her cautious, and prone to listen to him. As to Claude Carlton, I will be as frank with you as you have been with me. Had it been possible; if I could marry any man I would marry him. If he knew all, I believe he would still wish to marry me. Of course one is apt to think bachelors would make the best husbands, just as one often thinks what good bachelors married men would make. Still, I

think Claude Carlton a great gentleman," she went on musingly. "I have always looked forward to meeting once again some one who was really my ideal of what a great gentleman could be, and Claude Carlton comes up to that ideal. I have schooled myself to look upon true happiness as an improbability. I had it for just long enough to know what it meant, and then it was wrenched from me. Yet, in my heart, I have always felt that the pendulum of fate must some day swing as far back towards joy as it has swung forwards towards misery in the past. The world really belongs to woman, owing to man's incapacity to do without her. The only advantages men possess are those women don't want. I can't really tell you what I feel for Claude Carlton. I'm not sure that I know, but I guess it's nothing but the longing to feel again a man's head on my breast. Ah well! You, who know all there is to know about me, must be aware how weak I am in all real temptations."

Agnes shook her head. "Not weak, Hilda, but always swayed by impulses of the heart, which in you are so much stronger than impulses of the head."

There was bitter sweetness in Hilda's smile. "I would do the same could I have my life over again. I regret nothing in the life I've lived after I knew you. My trust, and the honor I held you in, restored my own. Oh! my dear, never in this world were the inmost spirits of two women so entirely in harmony. We have both come through great suffering, and what I owe to you can never be repaid. Such nobility as yours, Agnes, can only be its own reward. None other is worthy of it."

"Oh! my dear! my dear!" cried Agnes in a voice of expostulation. She waved her hand, as if to banish

sentiment. "Now, let us confront the menace of Major Griffith and Colonel Lycett," she went on briskly, throwing off her momentary emotion. "Of course Lycett recognized me. He remembered my name. How could he fail to do otherwise, when he was counsel for the prosecution, and obtained the verdict? He suspected you, and I should say he certainly remembered you under another name. What use will he make of his information?"

"None," promptly retorted Mrs. Davenant. "I felt quite at ease in his presence. He's a gentleman, and not of the type to deliberately injure a woman. Besides, was he not on our side? He will say nothing. Griffith we may eliminate. We know nothing of him, or how much he knows of us. Lord Lester is different. He is a born gossip, and he'll do all he can to discover something that will save Claude from me. He hopes I am not in a position to marry any man. He will try to make certain. Lady Tadcaster is a potential enemy. If ever a woman is really 'catty' it is when her looks are going. As to Major Carlton, I have tried to make him understand how useless it is to pursue me, but he's a persistent type, and seems determined to shipwreck his life on the rock that broke up Adam."

"Perhaps we ought to leave the neighborhood."

"No, I won't do that," answered Mrs. Davenant promptly. "I'm not going to leave Letty and Harry without a friend."

Agnes laughed. "You've absolutely adopted those two delightful children. They've brought a wonderful new interest into your life, Hilda."

Mrs. Davenant smiled rather self-consciously. "I acknowledge they have. I'm really fond of them both. When I was Letty's age I hadn't a friend in the world,

and I used always to promise myself that if ever I succeeded in life, I would help the friendless—a fellow-feeling, you understand, and their young enthusiasm is so delightful to me. How strange that so charming a man as Harry should belong to the Lake House, how curious to think of Letty living there in years to come.”

She sank into a listless posture in her chair, and folding her arms behind her head stared up at the ceiling; then she drew a long breath that was half a sigh.

“The Lake House has a fascination for me. I feel drawn towards it, yet I hate it. Do you know what it is to feel as if your heart were wrinkled, Agnes? I suppose I have the sort of nature that invites suffering. They say suffering is so good for us, don’t they?”

“Possibly it is, up to a certain point, but I’ve reason to know how it can cripple and dwarf.”

“It hasn’t hurt your real self, Agnes. You have never played the butterfly as I have; or chosen to belong to the mindless many, for whom life has no other use than to provide them with the largest share in animal pleasures, which they can always attain by hook, crook or cook.”

“The trouble is, my dear, that by nature you are subject to moments of hideous clarity,” laughed Agnes, “and it was those moments that poisoned town life for you. For five years your duty towards the men with whom you lunched, dined and supped, was to keep thought at bay, and skillfully hide away any show of intellect. You’ve quite wisely remembered that Mars loved Venus, not Minerva, and that the average man dislikes a brainy woman. You are hardly that, but you’re extremely intelligent, so much so that

all through your life you've succeeded in disguising the fact at will. You rather remind me of Mr. Wells' Joan in 'Joan and Peter.' You remember her hideous moments of clarity at the night clubs. For years you've tried to be rapid and vapid, now the reaction has come, the strain has begun to tell."

"Ah! how I agonized in my moments of clarity," Mrs. Davenant spoke dreamily, almost to herself. "I've always been subject to them, throughout all my very checkered career. They always arrived at the wrong time; just when I had settled down at some revue, that had been swept clear of all lucidity and coherence to suit mob mentality. Just when suitably dressed, or rather undressed, to match the place, the diners and winers; when I had schooled myself to utter vacuity—then my mind would begin to work. Then came that devastating sense of utter isolation through which I'd to play up. I found it increasingly hard to play up, yet I was only doing the same as hundreds of other pretty women, whose war-work was the cultivation of oblivion of war. I began to do it badly. I needed a rest. I knew all along that certain glib fallacies were pure nonsense. 'The men went singing and laughing over the top. The soul of the war, and the joy and pride of dying in a just cause.'"

She laughed scornfully. "I always knew that the soldier had thought, when he had time to think, of something absolutely different. That is why he had to be doped, why his short leave had to be robbed of all reality. The things he really did think of had to be blotted out. That is why no man now speaks of his war experiences. Ah! Well, those horrors are passed, and I'm happier here and now than I've ever been before. I've got that delightful contentment which

is ambition run to seed. I've got a past that streams behind me like a comet's tail, but I'm going to shut the door on it, and live in the present for the future. I'm going to be a mother to Letty and Harry, and damn the consequences, as some brilliant creature once said in the House of Commons."

"I believe that is our best line to take," returned Agnes quietly. "Our sense of humor ought to save us from tragedy, the tragedy of meeting two men whom we would marry to-morrow if we could."

"If we dared," echoed Hilda.

Mrs. Davenant lit another cigarette, and a silence fell between them. A few hours before, and the past had been as if forgotten. Now it had stirred uneasily in its grave, and thrown to the surface of life many an incident which had been consigned to oblivion. Both women were realizing that things forgotten are not dead, that nothing really dies, no matter how deep may be the grave into which it is cast.

Then Mrs. Davenant spoke again. "I should thoroughly have enjoyed our evening, but for the U.S.A. butting in. I loved seeing all the pre-war silver come to light again, and the excellent cooking and the flowers." She stopped short and taking a bunch of withered violets from her breast she tossed them into the fire. "I like the quiet, easy service. I loved the beauty of the room, and indeed of the whole house. It's the sort of beauty not born, but accumulated by time, and I love the way it persists in spite of the world's tumult. I could picture myself at the head of that table, Agnes, and picture myself a very happy woman."

"You picture the stuff that dreams are made of, dear Hilda."

"Dreams are all that are left to you and to me."

Agnes smiled a trifle contemptuously. "Yet we are about to be faced by a stern reality—being cut by the county."

Hilda laughed suddenly. "What an appalling prospect, yet somehow it has no terrors for me. You wise woman, how do you think of those profundities, yet I expect you're right." She laid her fingers on the diamonds glittering on her neck. "I saw Lady Tadcaster's eyes fixed on these stones, and I knew what she was thinking: 'Magdalenes were stoned in the past. They are still stoned, only now the stones come from South Africa.' I've half a mind to try a new experience. The last sensation left to me."

"It will only be an old one with a new name, Hilda. There aren't any new sensations."

"There is the sensation of goodness. I haven't, tried that yet."

"Because you can't possibly define goodness. It's often nothing but a lack."

"Ah! Well! I'm tired of everything, so it will be a new thrill to be tired of nothing," retorted Mrs. Davenant. "I've found life a tragedy, but I've always treated it as a comedy. Well! we're both agreed not to worry if the county turns its back upon us."

"That is the line I should take, Hilda. I don't feel inclined to put up with any snubs. My motto has been, and always will be, 'They say, What say they? Let them say.' Now I am for bed and oblivion."

CHAPTER XIV

CONFRONTED

THE Ghost's Walk was sodden and dreary, and the constant dripping of the rain outside the window reminded Letty Thorne of the ghostly footsteps she so often heard in the silent watches of the night. It was the last week in November, and for many days the weather had been intensely dark and depressing.

Letty was sitting in her bedroom darning her stockings. She often now retired there, preferring absolute solitude to the strain of sitting silently, hour after hour with an old man who constantly exhibited signs of advanced insanity. The many weeks she had spent under his roof had done nothing to draw her to his heart. He still preserved the trying silence that had been maintained between them from the beginning.

If there was any change in the attitude of Mrs. Greatrex it was an adverse one. It was plain to see that she was intensely annoyed at the long stay the solitary guest was making at the Lake House, yet Letty had begun to save her a considerable amount of labor.

After that strange lapse into almost genial hospitality, when Geoffrey Thorpe had assured his niece that he was willing she would remain with him as long as it suited her to stay, Letty searched out Sarah Grea-

trex, and asked to be given a share of the house work. "My own bedroom is not enough. Let me keep some of the other rooms clean," she urged.

Sarah regarded her scowlingly and suspiciously for a second or two, then she rapped out, "It's not worth while for the short time you'll be here."

"But I don't know how long I shall be here," Letty persisted. "Mr. Thorpe has kindly said I may remain as long as I please."

Mrs. Greatrex wheeled suddenly round, her eyes sparkling with anger.

"What!" she cried harshly, "Geoffrey Thorpe said that? Never! I don't believe it."

"Why not ask him?" suggested Letty mildly, and with that she walked out of the kitchen. She always strove to avoid acrimonious discussions, which might so easily end in loss of temper.

A few days later, on meeting the housekeeper on the stairs, the woman accosted her abruptly.

"As you seem to have nothing to do but idle away your time, you'd better undertake to keep the hall and front staircase clean, and you could wash up the dinner dishes. The gardener cleans the knives." Without waiting for an answer to this insolent speech Sarah ran downstairs and passed out of sight.

By this token Letty Thorne concluded that the housekeeper and the master had discussed the subject of her staying on, and the woman had been forced into a very unwilling acquiescence to her remaining.

The house work Letty attacked with a will, and happy results were very soon apparent. It was impossible not to remember that all those antique, and often beautiful objects which she now began to save from decay, would one day belong to Harry, and consequent-

ly to herself. It set a personal value upon her work, which otherwise would have resolved itself into a mere form of payment for board and lodging.

There is something uncanny in exploring any dwelling, the rooms of which have been locked up and unvisited for years; places that have been once consecrated to humanity, but have afterwards been abandoned to solitude and slow decay. Letty was not free to range all over the Lake House. To her uncle's wing she never dreamed of penetrating, and her passage along two other corridors was barred by a tape stretched across, and sealed at each end, bearing the sad legend in Geoffrey Thorpe's handwriting—

“No passage this way. Flooring unsafe.”

Knowing the condition of the rooms that were lived in, this warning did not surprise Letty. She concluded that the room her uncle invariably occupied was the original morning room. She had discovered many bedrooms all resembling each other. They contained immense beds, carpets dull with thick dust islanded amid a black sea of oak; cupboards large enough to live in, and dark portraits hanging upon the walls. There was a great, dreary library with locked bookcases, and a large organ carved with fruit and flowers. In the vast drawing-room every chair and sofa stood in its appointed place, as though they had grown like bushes through the dusty carpet. Upon the tables and mantelshelves the dust had settled like a thick gray pall.

On fine mornings Letty ventured to let the blessed sunshine into all those shuttered rooms. It glanced upon the stern ancestral faces on the walls, and through their dust evoked a look of life. The golden sunbeams fell upon old brocaded hangings and embroidered cov-

ers, but they had no power to warm; all things struck cold. The dark oak panels chilled her from their waveless depths, like the frozen silence of the organ and web-festooned harp. It seemed to Letty that all things seemed cursed in that accursed house. The hallowed places were desecrated, and where hospitality and good fellowship were meant to reign all was barren and solitary.

Certainly there were hours when Letty found life at the Lake House very hard to endure, but pressure was put upon her from two sources urging patience.

Miss Fanny Thorpe seemed in no hurry to receive her back at Hammersmith.

"Your uncle seems quite satisfied that you should remain at the Lake House, and I hope you will do all you can to guard him against the machinations of Sarah Greatrex, whom I mistrust extremely."

Letty as she read this letter could not refrain from smiling broadly at this suggestion. Aunt Fanny seemed to have no conception how entirely Sarah ruled the entire estate, and how little either the master or his niece had to say in its management.

"Food," went on Miss Thorpe, "being at famine prices it is a great relief to me to know that you are being well fed at some one else's expense. There is but little difference between my age and my brother's, and though I can hardly hope to benefit by his vast savings he may, if you play your cards well, leave a legacy which will save you thinking of marriage, and the indignity of being supported by any man. I never saw the need for marriage myself. You see how comfortably I live, and how free from worry I am, and I trust the same comfort may be yours in your old age."

"Poor Aunt Fanny," thought Letty, "never to have

known the joys of love. To find happiness in the snug physical comfort she holds to be all important. Well! I'd rather have some one to love, some one to work for, and God be thanked that I have found that some one, to make life infinitely sweet to me."

It had long been apparent to Letty Thorne that her aunt's violent opposition to her marriage with Harry Thorpe arose from jealousy. Miss Fanny, in her heart of hearts, deeply resented the fact that none of her brother's hoarded gold came her way. Her comfortable little income she spent entirely on herself, and found it provided all she needed, yet she bitterly resented the possibility of her niece marrying the heir to the Lake House, and eventually inheriting all the accumulated wealth that would go with it at her brother's death.

This contemptible meanness of soul was a source of deep shame to Letty Thorne, and she never spoke of it, even to her lover. Both believed that if they made their engagement public before Harry had made enough money to support a wife, Miss Fanny would repudiate her niece, and deny her a home. In none of his letters did Harry Thorpe omit to urge upon his Letty the necessity for making the best of present circumstances.

"Keep your thoughts fixed on the future, darling, and don't be daunted by the gray present. The old man must in time yield to your sweetness, and in spite of its melancholy I can't help feeling glad that you are already living under the roof that will one day be your own. Be at the old trysting-place on Friday at mid-day, and gladden the eyes of

"Your adoring,

"HARRY."

Letty's eyes dwelt lingeringly on those last words, and she kissed the paper tenderly. At that moment she felt it would be easy to bear with Sarah's insolence, and the old man's eccentricities, but what was harder to endure was the shadow of hateful mystery that hung over the house. Those ghostly footsteps, that curious, uncanny dragging sound that came so often from the wall behind her bed. No solution had come, and no stretch of her imagination could form any possible conjecture. Any attempt she had dared stealthily to make towards unmasking the mystery had utterly failed.

There were nights when she defied fear, and nights when fear defied her, and played havoc with her nerves. The enigma remained unsolved, as baffling now as it had been at the beginning.

The attitude of the neighbors might have been a great solace to Letty, had she not discovered at once that curiosity largely tempered their hospitality. Though no one had approached the Lake House in search of her, she had made numerous friends through the instrumentality of Mrs. Davenant and the Warburtons. Many of those pleasant people had expressed considerable interest in the strange rumors afloat concerning Geoffrey Thorpe and his house, and Letty found many of their questions extremely difficult to parry. The ghost of the Lake House was not looked upon as a family secret, it was considered common property, and a legitimate subject for inquiry, and Letty's reticence only added fuel to the fire of curiosity consuming the neighborhood.

The pale, wild rose beauty of the girl served as a piquant contrast to the mysterious and gloomy dwelling from whence she came. Her appearance in

their midst, the probabilities of her stay at the Lake House being of long duration, and the whispered suggestion of her engagement to Harry Thorpe, the heir, all added a certain romance to the affair, and revived with ever-growing force the languid interest that formerly had been taken in the reputed ghostly hauntings at the Lake House, and the weird manner of life of its present owner.

Letty Thorne often wondered if her uncle knew of these friendships she had made in the neighborhood. She was convinced that Mrs. Greatrex was perfectly well aware of all her movements, and she concluded it was probable that she imparted her knowledge to her master. Signs were not lacking to show that those two were on very confidential terms, though it was clear there was no love lost between them. Often Letty had discovered them seated together engaged in earnest conversation, but on her arrival on the scene Sarah would at once rise, abruptly break off the conversation, and quit the room. It was then a matter of course to see the old man again drop his haggard head over his papers, and wrap himself once more in his mantle of impenetrable silence.

"He doesn't mind where I go, what I do, or whom I speak to, so long as no human creature sets foot on his soil," thought the girl, quite content that things should be so. She had not the least desire to invite any one into the dismal precincts of the Lake House, and because of those secret meetings with her lover it was to her own interest to keep at bay the outer world.

It was quite a long time since Harry Thorpe had been able to snatch a brief holiday. Labor troubles in his engineering firm had thrown additional work

upon his shoulders, but on this intensely longed-for day Harry was due to arrive at the old trysting-place at midday, and at half-past one they were to lunch at Little Glentworth. "Agnes and I will be quite alone," Mrs. Davenant had said, "and it will be a positive charity to bring your Harry to cheer us up in this depressing weather."

The morning had broken dark and dreary, but sunshine was in Letty's heart when she awakened, and remembered what the swift-flying hours were to bring her. Now, as she rolled up her work preparatory to donning her hat, a pale gleam of wintry sunshine broke through the heavy clouds, and fell across the polished floor of the somber old room. She looked into her own eyes in the mirror and saw the lights of happiness strengthening in them, as the waves of love pulsed in her heart. Harry was thinking of her, sending out his soul to her, and she responded by sending out her soul to him. Formerly she had turned away from her mirror with a sigh, now the change in her was very apparent. Despite the nervous fears she suffered from, rest and good plain food, and the fresh country air had worked wonders for her. The pale cheeks were faintly tinged with carmine now, and the gray, lack-luster eyes were brilliant. In place of the shabby old black frock she wore on arrival, she now was smartly turned out in a dark blue coat and skirt, which was a gift from Mrs. Davenant. That fairy godmother had insisted on rearranging the masses of pale hair which Letty wore so simply drawn back and rolled up behind. For an hour she had submitted herself to the deft hands of the French maid, who, after going through various experiments finally expressed herself well content when she had fashioned a wonderful coil that looked like a

spiral shell of pale gold on the top of the dainty little head. Letty had learned to reproduce this wonder for herself, and she now surveyed it with immense satisfaction, as she pinned on a jaunty little felt hat decorated with sprightly little feathers.

"Still! I'm glad he first loved me when I was a little shabby, tired, pale thing, whom no one would ever call pretty," she said to herself as she took up her gloves and prepared to leave the room.

How good Mrs. Davenant and Miss Howard had been to her! Her heart swelled with gratitude towards them, as she tripped along the Ghost's Walk on her way to the trysting-place. What a vast difference these two women had made in her life! Mrs. Davenant was always thinking of something which would give her pleasure, and had made her so many presents that she felt very shy of accepting any more. Then she was so sweet to Harry, and oh! so deeply sympathetic over their love affair. Letty had arrived at the conclusion that there was no woman in the wide world to compare with Mrs. Davenant, and she frankly adored her.

It was a very tender meeting between the lovers after those weeks of absence, and when the first transport of their love had subsided, Harry held her away from him and looked her up and down, his face crinkled in a puzzled smile.

"You've done something to yourself; what is it?" he asked.

"Don't you like it, Harry darling?"

"But I can't even spot what it is, so how can I tell?" he retorted laughing. "Somehow you look more grown up. Not so much of a wild rose as a lovely lily. To me you're always lovely, Letty."

"And to me you are the most beloved being in the

wide, wide world," she declared, and kissed him very gently to seal her words.

They walked on now, slowly, towards the old summer house, his arm about her, her fair head thrown back against his shoulder. The short winter day was breaking into sunshine like a smile, before closing its brief hours in darkness, and as they walked she told him of all the kindness showered upon her by the ladies at Little Glentworth. It was so heavenly to discover such warm hearts in a world which hitherto had been none too kind to her, and she spoke of them with the ardor of a boundless gratitude.

Suddenly, in the midst of those confidences her voice was hushed, and by a common impulse they both stood still. For the first time they found themselves confronted in that lonely spot by another human being.

In the doorway of the old summer house stood Geoffrey Thorpe, looking straight at them.

For a few seconds sheer amazement at seeing the recluse out of doors and in such weather held Letty spell-bound. Was this the real man or his ghost? Then she hastily collected her senses on hearing his voice.

"May I inquire what is the meaning of this?" he inquired, and the bleakness of his voice was cut by a bitter sarcasm.

Harry drew Letty still closer to him, and faced his kinsman undaunted. His irrepressible humor, his invariable propensity to see the funny side of every *contretemps* banished the former gravity of his face. His very eyes smiled into the grim, angry gaze of the old man, who leaned forward menacingly, supporting himself on his stout staff.

"I should have thought the meaning was fairly obvious, sir, unless, for the moment you thought we were posing for the cinema. I'm so glad to see you take advantage of this dream of sunshine, and come out for a breath of air. May I hope also that the sight of two devoted young lovers will refresh your heart and gladden your eyes. Surely it must recall to you many tender recollections of your youth, of those bygone days when you, too, experienced the bliss of loving and being loved. I trust our engagement meets with your approval."

Harry had been stringing words together in a sort of desperate effort to gain time, but he showed no signs of the inward trepidation he felt. The old man was staring from one to the other, but there was no approval in the malignant expression of his haggard face.

"Engagement!" he shouted furiously. "What damned mockery is this between two paupers? You'll get nothing from me. What do you propose to live on?"

"Had we calculated upon your assistance to provide us with bread and butter we certainly would not now be engaged," retorted Harry, spiritedly. "Pray do not worry on our account, Mr. Thorpe. We are perfectly capable of managing our own affairs."

Harry's voice was perfectly courteous, despite the disdain of his words, and Geoffrey Thorpe's face lost some of its vindictiveness.

"All very fine for you, young man, but you'll perhaps permit me to suggest that my niece has had no opportunity of judging you by comparison with others," he sneered.

Harry glanced down at the face of the girl whose

arm he still held tightly. He had never seen her look like that, and his heart thrilled with joy and pride. She held her little head high and defiant, and a look of power, of supreme and flame-like passion lighted her face from chin to brow.

"I have made my own choice irrevocably, Uncle, as I have the right to do. There is but one soul in this world who could alter my intentions. That soul is Harry himself."

"Ah!" exclaimed Geoffrey Thorpe, grimly, "I see."

Suddenly a new thought seemed to strike him, and his manner changed to a sort of nervous eagerness.

"I had hoped to make you my heiress, Letty. I will do so still, if you will be wise and give up this absurd engagement. I have wealth that I can leave to whom I please."

Letty's face softened. "I do not want your wealth, Uncle Geoffrey. When I see how miserable it has made you, how could I be tempted by it? One cannot be more than happy, and I have happiness in full measure."

Again the old man's attitude of almost cringing eagerness changed to biting anger.

"One thing is certain. You have no present prospects of being able to marry," he exclaimed triumphantly.

"And why should you rejoice over that, Uncle? Would you rather see misery than happiness?" questioned Letty with gentle tenderness.

The pity in her voice pricked him, and he turned on her furiously.

"Hold your peace, girl. Long engagements are the greatest mistake. You are throwing away your life, and recollect I may live for years yet, and by that time

you will be old and ugly. If you are wise you will both agree to forget this foolery."

Harry laughed aloud in scornful derision; his tolerant good humor was giving way to something harder.

"Live as long as you please, sir. I'm no searcher after dead men's shoes. In my position it would have been perfectly possible for me to raise money on my future prospects. I have not done so. I prefer that my own exertions shall provide for the wife I have chosen. In place of forgetting, Letty and I only grow fonder of one another every day. She has no one in the world but me. I have no one in the world but her. Please don't delude yourself into the belief that anything you may say could part us."

Geoffrey Thorpe struck the ground furiously with his staff.

"What damnable insolence. How dare you address me in such a manner? You, who are nothing but an impudent trespasser on my lands! Begone with you, and never let me set eyes on your face again. One thing, before I leave you to your unspeakable folly. Remember—there is many a slip betwixt the cup and the lip, Harry Thorpe, and you may yet drop into your grave without fingering a farthing of the Lake House rental. Take my advice, say good-by, and forget each other."

With a final gesture of supreme contempt he passed them by and went on his way.

The lovers stood silently watching the bent, retreating figure, till it was lost to sight round a bend of the path, then Harry swung round with a careless laugh.

"What a dear old gentleman," he chaffed, but Letty's face was sad and very grave.

"Oh! Harry. How terrible to grow old like that,"

she whispered tragically. "How can any man make himself so perfectly detestable?"

Harry kissed the smiles back to her face, and strove to calm her natural agitation. He silently agreed with her, that such old age was indeed tragic, but outwardly he made light of the whole affair.

"We mustn't take too seriously what the old boy says, darling. We've always agreed he's very dotty. If ever I grow like that, Letty, have no mercy upon me. Watch me carefully, and if ever you see the faintest tendency to heredity in that direction, nip it unflinchingly in the bud, and then peck me as hard as ever you can."

"Well, now, that's over," he continued, drawing her down into the crazy old summer house seat, "and a rattling good thing too. We're going to have no more nonsense, darling. We'll announce our engagement openly to-day, when we arrive at Little Glentworth, and we'll hang the consequences. Are you prepared for that, my sweetheart?"

"I'm prepared to take any course you suggest, Harry," she answered as if suddenly waking up to life again, "but I can't get over my amazement at seeing uncle standing confronting us. I'm sure he's known all along that we met here, and was determined to put a stop to it. Now, he's forbidden us to meet here again."

"That doesn't matter. There are lots of other places," retorted Harry, then seeing that her soft eyes were dimmed as if with unshed tears, he bent his head above her upraised face and their lips met.

"I was awfully proud of you, darling, when you hurled defiance at the old ogre," he whispered. "We don't want a special dispensation from Geoffrey

Thorpe in order to get married. We are marrying for love, and that's good enough to go on with. As for coming here again, well, we'll meet in future at Little Glentworth, and until the day when your husband and natural protector is given the joy of taking care of you for always."

"You are everything on earth to me, Harry. I could not go on living without you now," she said with a little catch in her voice.

He held her close to him. He felt giddy with pure happiness, against which no obstacle could stand up.

"It is fine to be well dowered with this world's goods, but it's still better to be given love—the dower of Heaven," he whispered, with all the passion of his youth in voice and eyes.

CHAPTER XV.

WARBURTON'S ADVICE

“SO you'll meet here in future, that will be delightful, and what I've always wished for.”

They had drawn round the fire after a very cheery lunch, and Mrs. Davenant and Agnes Howard had listened with the most flattering interest to the story the lovers unfolded.

Outside, the daylight had already begun to fade away into a pale primrose west, and Hilda Davenant switched on a light by her chair.

“Come here to me, little Letty,” she said softly.

Letty Thorne knelt beside her chair. “I would come to you from the farthest ends of the earth,” she declared. “I don't know why you should be so wonderfully kind to us,” she went on, and her voice was touched by deep emotion. “If only every woman in the world was like you, what a different place it would be.”

“God forbid.” There was sudden tragedy in the low exclamation, but Letty continued determinedly: “It's difficult to think of you and so many others as of the same species. You, who do not even seem to know what unkindness means.”

Mrs. Davenant looked suddenly serious, almost sad. “What! I——” she exclaimed. “Oh! but I assure you I am often very unkind indeed, but what I called you

for was this." She fastened a single row of pearls round Letty's throat, "To give a string of pretty beads to a good little girl. There, child, that is my gift to you, upon your engagement becoming known to all and sundry."

Letty turned pale. She knew the gift was of great value, and she was stricken by an emotion which could find no expression in words. She sank down in a little heap on the floor, and stared at the beautiful, smiling face above her which owed nothing to art. The plain black velvet dress Hilda Davenant wore enhanced the purity of her skin, and the lovely throat, where the single string of pearls had been, was perfect in contour. To a girl, Hilda was an absorbing study.

"I can't say anything. It's no use trying," Letty burst out vehemently.

"Hilda will be infinitely relieved to hear that," laughed Agnes, who was watching the little scene with eloquent eyes.

Mrs. Davenant bent and kissed the girl. "There! I've got my thanks," she smiled, rising and moving to the window. "Ah! I see Mr. Warburton coming up the drive. Let us discuss the thrilling subject of your engagement with him. He's so practical and sympathetic."

Sunny, cheery Harry readily fell in with the suggestion. He was the embodiment of youth. It was impossible to look at him without feeling young again oneself. The well-knit, vigorous frame, the clear laughing eyes drew people instinctively towards him, and made him very attractive.

"By all means," he agreed, "there's no secret I wouldn't tell him, but our secret is now to be made public, so let's start with the parson."

Warburton entered with his usual cheerfulness. He was master of himself now, when in Agnes Howard's presence. He had dictated to himself a fortnight's banishment, during which he had worked hard in his parish, and turned things over constantly in his mind. The vicar knew that the two foes to human happiness are pain and boredom, and that the less a man has to do the more he will magnify his own troubles. Though he longed intensely to see the woman he loved, he held resolutely aloof, until he had formulated some plan to guide his future procedure. After all, the plan resolved itself into letting things slide. Gossip was now rife in Great Glentworth, and Warburton, though he sternly discouraged it in his own house, was often forced to listen to it in the houses of others. His sister had told him the simple story of Miss Howard's love affair in the past, and it had raised his hopes immeasurably. Agnes had wished him to be told, and he felt her confidence in him augured well for the future. She was in any case free to accept or reject his offer, should he decide to make it. Meanwhile he resolved to school himself to silence, and wait on Fate, and Emily had contributed to this determination. She had said, "I almost despair of your ever marrying now, Ambrose, but Agnes Howard is the type of woman I would have loved for a sister-in-law. A woman who would be wife to you and friend to me."

He had replied evasively, and treated her words lightly. He saw that she had no suspicion of his feelings towards Agnes, and he was glad, because hope and fear so constantly alternated in his heart. Though he believed there was no impediment against his marrying Miss Howard, he could not conceive of her ever caring for him sufficiently to become his wife. "I

will wait as patiently as I can, and be guided by circumstances," he told himself, and straightway resumed his habit of intimacy with the ladies of Little Glentworth.

"Sitting round the fire as if there was a foot of snow on the ground, and with no coal to be got, and wood at a premium," he protested with mock horror, as he shook hands all round. "It's clearing up outside, and there's going to be a lovely sunset, and I've just heard the music of the hounds in the distance, and doubtless the Master will be dropping in for tea."

"Don't be tiresome," retorted Hilda. "Don't I diligently gather up the fir cones every day, and the Master will be too muddy to turn in. Come and sit down, and congratulate Letty and Harry upon their engagement."

The parson laughed. "Oh! I've done that privately ever so long ago, but I'm delighted to do it again in public. Bless you both. Long life, and may every joy that love can give be yours."

Letty colored vividly, and murmured her thanks inaudibly, but she looked up at him and smiled, and he thought her very pretty as she stood there, a tall slender creature, with the play of firelight and shadow over her delicately cut face and eloquent eyes. Harry, looking very big, and proud, and happy, clasped the friendly hand extended to him.

"We would like to tell you how it came about that we were so secretive," he said, when they were once more seated round the fire. "You see, for no reason that we could make out, Letty's Aunt, Miss Thorne, objected to our engagement, so we had to meet by stealth. Unfortunately I haven't enough money to marry on at once, but next year I will have enough.

"You see, sir, the war threw me out, and I had to begin all over again, so to speak."

Warburton nodded, "Yes, I quite see. I know how many lads had to sacrifice their professions for the sake of their country."

"You darling," thought Hilda, as she sat silently listening, "how irresistibly attractive his simplicity, and his youth, and his good looks are."

"To-day," went on Harry, "we were surprised down by the lake by the sudden appearance of Geoffrey Thorpe."

"Geoffrey Thorpe! Why I thought he never went out!" ejaculated Warburton in amazement.

"No more he does. That's what we calculated upon," went on Harry eagerly. "He's never been known to go out for years and years, yet there he stood, scowling at us by the summer house door"

"Most disconcerting it must have been," laughed Agnes.

Harry had to laugh too. "It was, I can assure you, especially when he also forbade our engagement in very harsh language. Letty played up like a brick. We both assured him we intended to get married, unless the sky fell in, and he went off in a towering rage, vowing we'd get nothing from him. Just as if we wanted his wretched money," went on Harry with fine scorn. "Why, half the beauty of our marriage will be that all the time I'll be working like a Trojan for Letty. I'm young and strong and I love my work."

"You'll win out all right, my boy. Never fear. But how will all this affect Miss Thorne's stay at the Lake House? Won't it be rather unpleasant for her now?"

"Exactly what I feel," chimed in Agnes. "Letty had better stay here. In any case we want her and Harry to spend Christmas with us."

Harry was looking anxious. The same thought had occurred to him, and was worrying him more than he cared to own, but he brightened up at Miss Howard's suggestion.

"You've both been such angels of goodness to us that no new and enchanting proposition sounds in the least strange. I'm like my Letty, quite bereft of words to express our gratitude," said Harry, with a grave earnestness that sat strangely on his merry young face.

Warburton said nothing, but silently watched Agnes with a very bright look, grave, yet in a way shining. How wonderful, he thought, were those two women, in their strangely human interest! It had not been his experience to find women of that type so sympathetic to young lovers. Certainly the hateful gossip that raged around their names was wholly opposed to such characteristics, even did it contain a modicum of truth.

"I must go back to the Lake House, no matter what sort of reception I get," said Letty thoughtfully. "It is possible that uncle may turn me out, in which case I would most thankfully avail myself of the shelter and welcome offered to me here, but somehow I don't think his attitude, on my return, will be different to what it has been. If only his behavior towards me was my only difficulty, I really wouldn't have much to contend with."

"Ah! then there is something else? Is it anything that you can tell us, Miss Thorne? Remember what warm friends you are amongst."

The girl's whole expression had suddenly changed. The look she threw round the absorbed faces watching her was full of fear. Her eyes were arrested as they met her lover's puzzled gaze, and he saw entreaty in them.

"Yes, darling. You may say anything here. Much better be quite frank, and doubtless we can help you," he urged gently.

Letty shook her head emphatically, "Alas! no, Harry, no one can help me, and you'll all think me ridiculously foolish, when you hear that my great trouble is the ghost. I have to live with it, and endure it constantly. There is some horrible secret connected with the Lake House; no one could doubt it after living there a week. I can't explain what it is, because I don't know, but there is a constant, haunting presence which is terrifying."

No one spoke. Amazement was on every face, and Harry stared at the girl with an expression of mingled incredulity, anxiety and blank astonishment. He had been totally unprepared for such a disclosure. Warburton was the first to speak and break the silence. He noted how absolutely in earnest Letty was, and his voice was no less serious than her own.

"Is it something you see?"

"Ah! thank God, no, not yet. Hearing is bad enough," she answered with a shudder. "Let me tell you what it is. I have often longed to tell Harry, but I always lacked the courage. Now I feel I must tell someone, or I shall go mad. I am awakened night after night by stealthy footsteps creeping along the gallery and past my door. Then comes another sound, a curious brushing, as of an arm sweeping along the wall behind the head of my bed. Sometimes there is also

a clicking sound, as of metal striking metal. The footsteps return after a while, pass my door and die away down the empty gallery. I sleep in a part of the house right away from Uncle and Sarah Greatrex, so I can't believe the footsteps are theirs. What could either of them want in my wing in the dead of night? There are only three of us in the house, and we are all in bed by ten o'clock."

"What lies beyond your bedroom?" asked Warburton.

"Only another wing, closed like several others by a cord drawn across, and a notice hung up saying the floor is dangerous to walk upon. No one ever enters those corridors. One can see the windows from the outside, they are all closed and ivy grown, and some of the trees have been allowed to throw their branches almost on to the roof."

"Does the sound always come at the same time, and every night?" asked the puzzled Harry. Knowing more of the Lake House than most people he felt utterly at a loss to find an explanation for his sweetheart's weird experiences.

"I don't hear it every night, but very often. Perhaps it comes every night, but doesn't always awaken me. I've heard it about midnight, and as late as three o'clock in the morning. I've never heard it by day, though I've sat in my room sewing for hours in utter silence. The footsteps are so soft and stealthy, they make me horribly afraid."

"And you've never mentioned the matter to Mr. Thorpe?" asked Warburton.

"Never. If you knew Uncle you would understand why. I spoke to Mrs. Greatrex about the ghost story connected with the house, and asked her if she'd ever

heard or seen anything. She was very sarcastic and disagreeable. 'I've seen nothing worse than myself' was her only reply."

"You'll have to confront that ghost, Letty." It was Mrs. Davenant who spoke. There was an expression of startled excitement on her face, and her voice was sharp and firm. "What you hear is no ghost, but a creature of flesh and blood. You must face it courageously, and lay your very natural fears to rest."

"Mrs. Davenant is right. It is the only thing to do," urged Harry. "You needn't fear an ordinary human being, darling. It is certainly either Geoffrey or Sarah Greatrex, and you know the worst of both."

Letty was unconvinced, "What could either of them be doing there at such an hour?" she argued miserably, "and why shouldn't they come by day if they're human?"

"That we can't tell. You know how peculiar Geoffrey Thorpe is. I've never known you to lack courage, darling; I've seen this very day how you confronted your uncle by the lake. Make up your mind to throw open your door the next time you hear the footsteps, and you may take my word for it you'll see nothing worse than Geoffrey Thorpe or Sarah Greatrex."

"Oh! I will try to be courageous enough, but you can't think how nerve-racking the mystery is," the girl assured him, and there were tears in her voice. "There is something ominous and secretive in the whole atmosphere of the house. I feel as if it hid some awful tragedy."

"It probably does," thought Warburton, but he did not say so.

"I agree with Mrs. Davenant that the footsteps are human. May I make a suggestion? Take a candle, and examine as carefully as you can the flooring of the closed corridor which runs beyond your room. Do not pass the barrier, but see if you can detect any sign of recent footsteps on the flooring. I suppose the corridor isn't carpeted?"

"No," answered Letty, "it's black oak, and covered with dust."

"Good: then that makes it all the easier for you. I don't say that my suggestion unravels the mystery, but if you discover signs of footsteps having passed that way, you can be pretty sure they are the human footsteps you so often hear. It will give you more courage to open your door and confront the owner of the footsteps. Possibly Mr. Thorpe is a somnambulist. He may be walking in his sleep, in which case it would be well to use caution and not awaken him. In any case come in and have tea with us to-morrow, and let me know what you have discovered by the aid of the candle. You may hear nothing to-night, but I want to help you all I can. It will surprise me very much if you do not report distinct marks on the dusty floor of that corridor. Compare it with the other corridors that are closed, you'll soon see the difference."

His quiet confidence was infinitely grateful to Letty's nervous fears. Whilst listening to the low, quiet voice she felt capable of the most heroic behavior, but she knew how different she would feel when away from his mental support, and alone in the ghostly, hushed atmosphere of the Lake House. However, she gave her promise to follow his instructions, and to strive for sufficient courage to open her door at the most dreaded moment.

"Say a little prayer for me," she whispered in Warburton's ear as he rose to take his leave, and the warm pressure of his handshake, and the answering glance of his deep, dark eyes gave assurance that her petition would be granted.

CHAPTER XVI

SAIDIE HALL SEES INTO THE FUTURE

AS Warburton passed out the M.F.H. and his wife were shown in, and Mrs. Davenant with perfectly disguised astonishment rose to receive them. Captain Hall often dropped in at all sorts of odd hours, in fact, whenever he could frame the flimsiest excuse for doing so, but Mrs. Hall paid her calls in a more formal manner.

"We aren't frightfully muddy, and we killed in the West Copse after a rattling good run. Now, we've come to beg for some tea," she exclaimed. "We've sent the hounds and horses home, and ordered the car to come for us in half an hour."

"How delightful of you! We'll have tea immediately," replied Mrs. Davenant ringing the bell. "Now, let me introduce to you Miss Thorne of the Lake House, and Mr. Harry Thorpe, also of the Lake House, but at present domiciled at the White Hart."

Saidie Hall wheeled round. In the twilight darkness of the room she had not observed the lovers. Now they sprang into prominence as Miss Howard switched on the lights. She had heard a great deal of country gossip concerning them both, and her vivid face betrayed the interest she felt.

"Very pleased to meet you," she said genially, in her frank American way, and offering her hand. As

the Master at her elbow followed suit her sharp eyes flashed over Letty with quick penetration, and noted the pearls at her throat. She was instantly aware whose property they had been, and her curiosity was greatly stirred by the discovery.

"We always regret that the Lake House is closed. Seems such a waste, a fine old place like that," Captain Hall was saying.

"If Letty and I survive Geoffrey Thorpe we will do our best to restore it to its former glory, and I promise you the doors shall be thrown wide open to you all with the heartiest good will."

Harry's words dropped into a momentary silence with startling effect, and Jim Hall instantly grasped the situation.

"By Jove! So that's how the land lies! I'm delighted. Warmest congrats. Of course I knew you were the heir, but you've been such a shy bird I've never been able to lay salt on your tail. Best of luck to you, Miss Thorne, and may I live to see you reigning at the Lake House. It needs a touch of youth badly. The Old Boy's something of a trial, I fancy. What! eh!"

In a cross current of cheery questions and answers they went into the tea-room, and disposed themselves round the softly lit table. Mrs. Hall, whilst proceeding to make a hearty meal, found herself, not for the first time, envying the quiet luxuriousness of Little Glentworth. Housekeeping seemed to have been brought to a fine art in that establishment, and its ordered quiet was in marked contrast to the racket always going on at Yerlingham.

"I envy you your cook, Mrs. Davenant," she exclaimed, helping herself to a couple of *foie gras* sand-

wiches. "My cook is, alas, a hired assassin, and the kitchen girls are minxes. I'm certain the butler's a labor leader. I caught him reading the *Daily Herald*, and the footmen are pure Bolsheviks. They've turned Yerlingham into a Soviet. Even the Pekinese are affected by the revolutionary atmosphere. They're the most disobedient little brutes in all the animal kingdom."

"Ah! it's not an easy job to be a good landlord now," chimed in her husband. "Looks as if the kids would all be paupers. Every jack one of 'em will have to learn a trade. The old country's done, they say, but there's still lots of foxes."

Mrs. Hall had fallen into silence, whilst the Master ran on in his serio-comic fashion. The visit paid to her by the two Americans had enormously stimulated her interest in her present hostess. Gossip, always busy with the ladies of Little Glentworth, had not interested her much, but the few words dropped by Griffith and Lycett at the Carlton's dinner table, had been enough to confirm her belief that some dark secret enveloped the lives of Mrs. Davenant and Miss Howard.

During the drive home from the dinner party she had frankly questioned Colonel Lycett, "Did you ever hear of Mrs. Davenant in Washington?" and the concise answer had been "Never." Major Griffith was equally non-committal, but his quiet disclaimer of any knowledge of the ladies in question had not satisfied the nimble wits of Saidie Hall. She saw something suspicious in his extreme reticence. He had known a man named Thorpe of the Lake House, in Washington, but she dreamed of no connection between the defunct scamp and Mrs. Davenant, and did not push

her inquiries further in that direction. The next day Lord Lester had come to lunch. He achieved no success with the Americans, but because of this rebuff he had been rather more open than he had intended with Mrs. Hall. As they strolled round the gardens together he did not read to her Bellows' letter, but he hinted very broadly at its contents.

"You can see how greatly attracted Claudie is," he had said, in extenuation of his statements. "One naturally wishes him to marry a woman unencumbered by an unpleasant past. One is not even sure in this case of the lady's real name."

Mrs. Hall had agreed, whilst her mind was busily conning over the names of her friends and acquaintances in Washington, to whom she meant to apply for information. She was guiltless of any mean jealousy, and she honestly liked what she saw of Mrs. Davenant, but it might, she calculated, be as well to have something in reserve, as Claude Carlton was not the only man who felt the beauty's strong attractions. Meanwhile she determined to see more, in future, of the lady in question, and she had herself suggested turning in to Little Glentworth for tea, when the hounds killed on the border of its woods.

It had been quite a pleasant surprise to find Letty Thorne and her lover quite at home in Mrs. Davenant's drawing-room. Rumor had already announced their engagement, but Saidie had not chanced to set eyes on either of them before, and now she liked what she saw, and was ready to be on friendly terms.

"Tell me," she said, in her direct way, "is Mr. Thorpe likely to live long?"

"For the next twenty years," promptly replied Harry, whom she had addressed.

Her face fell, and she threw up her hands. "Oh! what a misfortune! I never pretend to wish anything but the removal of such wretched lives. I want to see you and your fiancée installed as soon as possible."

"That's hardly a matter we can arrange," returned the amused Harry. "I quite see all the changes I'll make in the old place, but I don't count on dead men's shoes. Quite conceivably Geoffrey Thorpe may outlive me and Letty."

"He won't. He'll be dead within the next three months," she retorted, with a strange, ruminative little laugh.

Something in her manner threw a spell of amazed silence upon the little group round the table, and she found her curious retort being taken very seriously.

"Those sort of things often come to me," she added quietly.

"Are you clairvoyante?" asked Miss Howard, breaking in on the amazed hush.

"I believe so," she spoke with a reluctant drawl. "Impressions come to me, and they are generally right. I believe that Geoffrey Thorpe will be in his grave before New Year's Day."

"I'll bet my bottom dollar on that, if Saidie says it," declared her husband solemnly. "She's a stunner at spotting winners."

"Then she's a gold mine," said Hilda, who was desirous of turning off the conversation on to lighter lines.

Mrs. Hall shook her head. "Alas! my impressions won't come at call—they just filter in, but when they do come in—well—they come off," she ended with dry abruptness.

All Mrs. Davenant's efforts to alter the trend of

thought that swayed Saidie Hall were in vain. The American possessed a streak of genuine mysticism, which had found itself transplanted in very uncongenial soil, but it never really perished, and at odd times asserted itself very strongly. Something in the atmosphere that evening had roused it into life. Possibly, it was Letty Thorne's presence, her connection with the Lake House and its uncanny traditions. Possibly, it was the strong attraction that she at once felt for Harry Thorpe, that had caused her to prophesy.

Whilst striving to give her attention to the Master's harmless chatter, Hilda Davenant kept one ear open to Harry's "silly expansiveness" as she mentally termed it.

He was rather prone to be taciturn, and non-responsive where his family was concerned, but now he was talking in the most candid manner about the former owners of the Lake House property, and Mrs. Hall was drinking in every word with absorbed attention. "Had my father lived he'd have succeeded before me, but he died before Mark Thorpe. Mark went down at sea, after a very discreditable career. He had to leave this country, and he went to America. There he got into more troubles, money and women. He was, I've heard, a most plausible adventurer, and he had rather a serious affair with a beautiful actress called Lambert, or some such name. There was a scandal, and he married her, but luckily they had no children."

"It never answers when the lady of the Manor springs from the boards," remarked Saidie, "but you know women always will run to extremes both in love and hate. It doesn't surprise me that a man like Mark Thorpe got some woman into his toils; doubtless he

got many, for heaps of us would really love to run over the rim of the world and drop into space, just to see what it looks like on the other side. There's nothing so boring to women as the happy medium."

When Mrs. Davenant's guests had taken their departure Agnes Howard turned to her with a gay little air of amusement.

"The country hasn't cut us yet, Hilda. We've had quite a number of callers this week."

Mrs. Davenant did not answer for a moment. She sat looking down, one slender hand covering her eyes. When she did speak her voice was very grave.

"I heard Harry telling Mrs. Hall that Mark Thorpe had married in Washington an actress called Lambert, and that there were no children to succeed him when he died."

For a moment Agnes looked as grave as her friend, then suddenly she smiled again.

"What of it, my dear? The name Lambert has no significance here. Why be anxious about nothing? Your fears are groundless. Colonel Lycett would never give us away, of that I'm convinced. He has left Yerlingham, and the skies haven't fallen."

Mrs. Davenant rose to leave the room. She gave a gesture of weary impatience.

"Oh! I really don't care one way or the other. Don't let us talk of it any more."

When the door had closed Agnes Howard gave a deep sigh, "Yet she does care most awfully, alas!" she whispered to herself, "and I know why."

Mrs. Hall occupied alone the inside of her car, and she gave herself up to deep thought as they sped homewards.

"Lambert! Yes, I'm sure that was the name Lester

mentioned, and he said Davenant might not really be her name. Thorpe married a Washington actress called Lambert. He was drowned at sea. At the Carltons' dinner Mrs. Davenant owned to having been in Washington, and those fine pearls the girl was wearing! Who really is that girl? Why does Mrs. Davenant take so deep an interest in her?"

Such were the questions Saidie Hall turned over and over in her mind, but she determined to solve the mystery alone, and to share her suspicions and conjectures with no one.

CHAPTER XVII

LETTY FACES THE TERROR

THE night had closed in dark and humid. The Lake House lay dreaming in silence, and as Letty Thorne stood on the threshold of her open door she could hear nothing but the tumultuous beating of her own heart.

Supper was over, and she was free to retire for the night. She had found her uncle in no way altered in his demeanor towards her. That strange, unexpected interview by the lake, which had taken place but a few hours ago, might have been a dream. It had not changed Geoffrey Thorpe's attitude towards his niece in the smallest degree. He had not referred to it even indirectly, and they sat together in grim silence, whilst they ate their supper of bread and cheese, and the tame little mice crept about their feet in search of crumbs.

Perhaps it was only a dream, thought the girl, as she let her eyes wander away into the deep, dark corners of the room, where the shadows seemed to linger even on the sunniest day. As she thought of Harry in the snug, brightly lit parlor of the White Hart, an intense longing came over her to see his adoring glance, to hear his blithe voice. To-morrow they would meet again, but at that moment to-morrow seemed very far distant. How cheerful it would be

at the White Hart, with the sound of hearty, rustic voices drifting in from the bar parlor, where all the affairs of State were debated and settled over the beer mugs. Mrs. Prescott, the landlady, would be bustling in and out of the best parlor talking to Harry, whilst she served his savory supper with her own hands. Every one loved Harry, and was in open sympathy with his difficulties. To-night he would tell Mrs. Prescott their precious secret, and receive her warm approval and congratulations, and she would hurry away to the bar parlor with the glad tidings. There would be many drinkings to health and happiness, and probably farmers' deputations would find their way to Harry's quarters, and there would be hearty hand-shakings and more congratulations, and doubtless a very convivial evening would follow.

Letty turned her thoughts and eyes back to the actual scene before her. To the haggard figure of the old man, who sat in his accustomed seat with his back turned to that aggressive portrait on the wall. How unhappy he looked! how uneasy and harassed, how ill! How his clawlike hand shook, as it raised the battered silver tankard to his shriveled, trembling lips! The prophetic words uttered that afternoon by Mrs. Hall came back to Letty with a rush. Strange words to be uttered by such a woman. What did they really mean? What significance had they? Could any one really foretell the death of another? Surely such events were in the hands of God! Were they fated, or did they come by chance?

Suddenly Geoffrey Thorpe jerked round his haggard head, with that wild, fearsome glance over his shoulder. The action had become habitual to him. What did it mean? What, at first, had given rise to it?

Letty forced herself to look critically at the portrait of Mark Thorpe, the man who had been lost at sea. For an instant, as the painted eyes met her own, there was something so sinister and menacing in their glance that she shuddered.

What a handsome striking face it was, but what a hateful one! A careless, devil-me-care expression dominated the upper part; the lower, though finely modeled, was marred by cruel, contemptuous, sneering lines. Why did Geoffrey Thorpe permit the portrait to hang there, when it so obviously tortured his mind, and gave him no peace or respite by day or night? The huge log fire had burned low, and the heaps of glowing faggots shed a weird light on the portrait, whilst the high-backed chairs and carved dower chests cast strange, uncouth shadows all around. Letty started as a half-burned log fell with a crash upon the hearth, and then came the beat of rain upon the casement, and the moan of a rising wind through the trees.

The evening wore away. Letty had gone to her own room, and the clock over the empty stables had long since struck nine. She stirred the glowing embers of the fire into a blaze, for her night's work was only about to begin. She calculated that her uncle and Mrs. Greatrex must both have retired to their rooms, and it would now be safe to commence investigations.

As she stood with palpitating heart on the threshold of her open door, shading the guttering candle with her hand, the silence was so intense that it weighed like a pall upon her.

On noiseless footfall she crept towards the corridor, which ran along the wing beyond her room. As she reached it the black oak boards gave back a hollow

echo to her tread, but she hurried softly on until she reached the cord that was stretched across its mouth.

She stooped low down and held out the candle, throwing its flickering beams on to the floor.

Yes! Warburton was right! She could distinctly trace footsteps on the thick layer of gray dust. Large, untidy footprints, such as might have been made by Geoffrey Thorpe's loose, slippared tread. She straightened herself again and listened intently. Not a sound! She peered down the black tunnel in front of her. Its end was swallowed up in impenetrable darkness. What lay beyond? She could not tell what those closed rooms contained, or upon what errand went those slippared feet. All was mystery still, but she had seen enough to convince her that a human being did pass along that corridor, despite the warning that it was unsafe for human feet.

Very cautiously she retraced her way, and, regaining her room, she closed the door, and sat down by the fire to think. She had carried out the first half of her allotted task, the easier half, but as Warburton had assured her would be the case, the discovery she had made had robbed the rest of its greatest terrors. Those footprints in the dust were undoubtedly human. Ghosts, if such entities did exist, left no visible trace of their passage. She felt that it would no longer require superhuman courage, on hearing the approach of that stealthy tread, to throw open her door, and ascertain beyond a shadow of doubt who walked the night on so secret an errand. Her courage rose considerably, and though her surroundings were so gloomy, and so utterly solitary, and her long brooding over the mystery had weakened her nerves, she decided to carry out the advice given her by Harry and Warburton.

She undressed and prepared as if for bed, and wrapping herself in a warm dressing-gown, she took up a book and resigned herself to sit up till daybreak, if necessary.

Certainly, nothing is more trying to the nervous system than awaiting a dreaded uncertainty. More especially is this the case if the ordeal has to be endured in the dead of night.

In Letty's case the conditions were rendered even more unpleasant than usual by reason of their setting. The dilapidated old house, which the most material person would have described as ghostly, the peculiar mode of life of its occupants, and the profound and desolating atmosphere of mystery they created, all weighed powerfully against sane and rational reasoning.

Letty Thorne was eminently practical in ordinary life, but she possessed the vivid imagination of the artistic temperament, and that imagination had been over-developed and unbalanced during the last three months of her residence in the Lake House.

As she sat by her fire, striving to fix her mind on her book, yet with every sense strung to acutest tension, she counted the slow hours up to the second hour of the new day, as they were tolled off by the stable clock, and the church tower in the distance. Again she mended the fire till it blazed and crackled on the hearth, till it flashed on the somber draperies of the canopied bed, and lit up the high mantelpiece with its intricate carvings, and the raftered ceiling with its ponderous oaken beams.

She strove to fix her thoughts on Harry, and as his face rose before her she longed to lay her head on his breast and whisper to him. If she could but leave this

silent lonely room, and run through the darkness to him. The vague dread was stealing over her again, despite all her efforts. A cold chill crept through the room. The dread grew, and her book fell from her knee to the floor, with a dull, heavy sound.

Her head had begun to feel hot and tired, and her eyes too heavily weighted with sleep to remain open, and she moved to her window and very softly threw it wide. The night was intensely still. Not a breath stirred the moisture laden, bare branches of the trees. The sky was draped in heavy clouds, not a star shone betwixt their slowly drifting masses.

Suddenly, there broke out a dismal howl from the house-dog in his kennel in the yard, and Letty drew in her head hastily. The sensation of icy chill that invaded her came not from the dampness of the atmosphere. It was the result of another sound, faint enough, as yet, but still clearly audible to her trained ear—the approach of those footsteps she so dreaded.

The vague panic was creeping over her again. Ah! to be out of that grim and silent room, to be with Harry, to have done with the Lake House and its eerie secrets forever. The fire was dying down; it was surely much darker.

She stood up stiffly by the window, every nerve on the rack, every muscle taut, her head turned towards the door. Her pulses throbbed wildly, her very blood seemed to run ice, but she stood there quietly waiting, and mentally repeating to herself the words, "Harry shall not find me a coward."

There are moments in life when every power of the mind is unnaturally strained, and when thoughts hitherto undreamed of are formed in one short instant. Letty knew what she had to do, but though she was

resolute to do it she still lacked the physical courage. She had a curious sensation that her feet refused to move.

The stealthy footsteps neared her door, they passed it and went onward towards the barred corridor. In another second or two she had lost trace of them.

Inertia dropped from her suddenly, and the thought of Warburton, praying that courage might be given to her, sprang like a flaming sword through her mind. The steps would return again.

Deliberately she walked to the door and waited, her hand upon the knob, ready to turn it instantly. Now, her straining ears caught another faint sound, the cautious closing of a distant door. A little longer, and she could hear the footsteps creeping back again. Suddenly, all fear fell from her, and was replaced by an irresistible desire to learn the truth, to know the worst. The footsteps were creeping closer—now she knew they were about to pass. With a mixture of dread and desperation she threw wide the door.

She stood face to face with Geoffrey Thorpe.

In that wild first moment the two pairs of eyes held each other in a stern conflict of tenacity. Thorpe was the first to break the spell, with a scared glance over his shoulder. The next moment a large key hanging in his finger, clanked against the brass candlestick he carried.

"What's this?" he exclaimed harshly. "Why aren't you in bed and asleep?"

"I was frightened," she faltered tremulously.

"Frightened! What frightened you?" he scoffed, throwing the light on her face and scanning it closely.

"Footsteps. I couldn't think what they meant, at such an hour."

"And what business is it of yours to inquire? Whose footsteps would they be, but those of the master of this house? Understand, I won't have any spying here, and I detest spies. Surely I am at liberty to walk about my own house when and where I please."

"But the howling of the dog startled me. I was reading, not sleeping. I'm sorry," she faltered, almost in tears from the violent reaction overtaking her.

She saw him shrink back, and his pale face grew whiter.

"The dog shan't keep you awake again, and I allow no reading in bed. You'll burn the house down about our ears. Where do you get so many candles?"

"I buy them in the village," she confessed truthfully, "but I promise not to do it again, Uncle."

"Good girl! That's the proper spirit," he answered more genially, "and in future trust me to keep guard over the security of the house. I often stroll round, just to see that all's right. Good-night."

He nodded briefly and moved away, and she retired into her room and closed the door.

She knew that his last words were false. She detected instantly that he had uttered them as an after thought, and that his nocturnal prowlings had nothing whatever to do with the safety of the house. He had offered no real explanation of his errand at so strange an hour. She had not expected that he would, yet she felt no relief at finding that the ghost had flesh and bones, and that it was a mortal hand which swept so often over the wall behind her bed. She was more convinced now than ever before that some deep mystery was attached to the house, and she acknowledged to herself that she had not yet begun to solve it.

CHAPTER XVIII

MURDER

IT was early in December, and the weather had turned bitterly cold. True, the sun shone by day and made walking a delight, but several degrees of frost spell-bound each night, and coated the bare woods and hedges in a radiant veil of sparkling silver.

Agnes Howard had suggested ten days in London, but Mrs. Davenant had rejected the proposal.

"I haven't the least inclination to go to town," she had retorted rather crossly.

"Then why not let us invite a cheery party to come here?" urged Agnes. "We always intended to have some house parties, and we've had none. We seem to have settled down into an utterly humdrum existence. Soon, we'll find ourselves attending all the Mothers' Meetings and tending our own cabbages."

"Have any one you like, Agnes, but not on my account. I'm perfectly satisfied with the lives we lead, and thankful for the rest," was the quiet retort.

Miss Howard had suggested a change as a means of cheering up her companion. Hilda had developed a curious moodiness, and took long walks alone, by preference. She seemed to be plunged in constant thought, and her spirits had lost their bright resilience and sparkle. Agnes could not decide what ailed her. Was it that she missed Claude Carlton's frequent visits and

obvious admiration, or was it something secret and undisclosed that weighed upon her mind? Miss Howard was inclined toward the latter interpretation. Major Carlton had written several times to Mrs. Davenant, a regular correspondence seemed to have sprung up between them, and his return had been announced by his mother as being due in about ten days' time. Already Mrs. Carlton was planning a big Christmas dinner party, and a dance to follow. There would be a cheery house party, and possibly skating. It looked like a hard winter.

This bright prospect ought to have raised Hilda's spirits, in place of depressing them, but there was no change perceptible. In vain did the devoted Agnes seek to probe the mysterious cause of Hilda's depression. The only reply, on putting a plain question, was "No, I've nothing more on my mind than usual, but recollect that I always carry with me a heavy weight."

"It has hardly affected you in the past; why should it do so now? You are looking pale and fagged," urged Agnes. "I suppose you won't like my saying so, but I sometimes regret bitterly that we ever came here. We should have steered clear of the Lake House and its ill-omened traditions, instead of settling down at its very gates. I believe its proximity depresses you, even though it has turned out that there is no ghost, and you have discovered Letty Thorne."

Mrs. Davenant seemed to ponder these words, and Agnes, who was watching her closely, saw her color deepen, then fade. Looking up she met the gaze of her friend and said quietly—

"I'm glad—very glad we did come here. I have found Letty, but I feel very often, and very strongly,

that we were sent here. I mean that a power other than our own directed us, and that there is a purpose in our living at Little Glentworth."

"What sort of purpose?" persisted Agnes. She expected that the answer to her question would have some connection with Carlton, and Hilda's avowed liking for him, but she was mistaken.

"I believe—I feel a very strong conviction that the Lake House will solve the problem of my life, and the terrible uncertainty of years," was Hilda's quiet reply.

"I don't understand! How could it?" demanded the perplexed Agnes.

"I don't know. I only tell you what I feel. I've nothing to go on."

Harry had returned to London with the happy prospect of a Christmas holiday at Little Glentworth, but there had been long discussions between the two ladies, Letty and Warburton, upon the Lake House mystery. Agnes and the parson, on hearing that, as he supposed, the ghost was none other than Geoffrey Thorpe, had inclined to the belief that there was nothing more to learn, and that the so-called mystery did not exist. After all, there was nothing very unusual in the behavior of the old man. Every one knew how eccentric he was, and rambling about his own house in the dead of night was a perfectly legitimate amusement.

"Why shouldn't he?" argued Warburton. "Probably he sleeps badly. Probably he's full of suspicious fears and dread of burglars. A common enough condition of mind in those who lead secluded lives. In any case it is indisputable that he has a perfect right

to please himself, and as his nocturnal rambles no longer alarm you, why worry any more?"

Letty listened respectfully to those logical remarks, but remained quite unshaken by them.

"I don't worry. After all it isn't my affair," she said, "and when I hear the footsteps I no longer feel afraid, and often they don't even awaken me, but I'm more than ever convinced that there is a mystery. Though I no longer expect to see a ghost I can't help feeling a deep dread of the whole place. It is weighed down by some horrible secret. The whole atmosphere is impregnated with mystery. No one could live under that roof and fail to sense it. Something sinister is concealed there. What, I don't know. I can't even imagine."

"It can be no human being. Such things happened perhaps in a less enlightened past. They couldn't happen now, they would be discovered," argued Warburton, with conviction. "I discussed with Harry the possibility of some one being hidden, or kept prisoner in the Lake House. He agreed with me that such a presumption was quite untenable. Recluse, as Mr. Thorpe undoubtedly is, certain people do approach and often enter his house. Mrs. Greatrex lives there, the gardener is in and out, and has been about the place for years. The tradesmen and postman come to the door. There are old retainers still on the property. Repairs must sometimes be executed, or the roof would fall in."

Agnes Howard warmly emphasized those contentions, but Letty remained obviously unconvinced, and apparently Hilda Davenant took Letty's view. She listened very quietly to all the arguments, but took no

part in them, nor did she once express agreement with Warburton and Agnes. She also was unconvinced.

The short winter day was closing, as she sank down with a tired little sigh on the seat of the old summer-house by the lake.

The air had a sharp nip in it, and the deepening orange which suffused the western sky, and spread into a vast crimson canopy in the upper heavens, warned her that the day was done. She had no fear of being surprised in that deserted spot, sacred only to the love-making of Harry and Letty. The girl never came there alone, and it was too cold for the old man to be out. He had left the house but once that year, when he had surprised the lovers. The trysting-place was now abandoned to wild nature, but it had a singular attraction for Hilda Davenant. Her thoughts flew freely there, and the utter solitude was restful to a woman who had spent all her life in public, and was rarely off guard. For some time now, she had been obsessed by the conviction that the one great difficulty in her life would find its solution there. She made no attempt to speculate as to how this would come about. That was a secret held by her other self, the self that gave rise to the conviction, and had a wisdom of its own. She was content to drift, to wait patiently on Fate, and surrender herself to that imperious urge which drove her so often to the gloomy fringe of the lake.

Often she had asked herself the question, "What draws me here? What is the shadow that has crossed my path, and darkened once more my future outlook? I had begun to forget, now I am again enveloped in the shadow of the past." Instinctively she felt that

it was a shadow. Could it be the same shadow that darkened Letty's life at the Lake House, and which caused her to long for the moment when she could leave it? Was this same shadow operating upon her in an exactly contrary degree? It came to her that imagination was floating farther and farther away, with her yearnings and desires, in a wind of dreams. To what port was she being wafted? Was it to a land of shades and still deeper resignation, or to a harbor of sunshine, where dreams of joy would find their fruition?

The sun had finished his short circuit, and had left a crimson trail of glory behind him in the frosty sky. Against the northern horizon were piled up great gray masses of cloud, tinged with carmine and gold. The wooded heights surrounding the lake were transformed into a fairy forest of hoar-frosted boughs and stark leaves. King Winter reigned supreme, and had silenced the merry chatter of the little brooks, and draped the brown fern fronds and overhanging foliage in silver, a miracle of fantastic and delicate tracery.

The lake was covered by a thin film of ice, save where deep springs welled up from its depths. Its surface reflected lovely lights, opal tints of carmine, gold, steely blue and deep rose, and Mrs. Davenant watched them slowly fading into the colder, purer radiance of a full moon, now climbing above the woods, whilst the zenith was still rosy and gold.

She was about to tear herself away from the silent enchantment, and retrace her steps homewards, when the deep peace was broken by a startled blackbird, messenger of storms, darting wildly out from its roost-

ing place. It flew screaming across the lake, and disappeared into the black shadows beyond.

She stood up just within the entrance of her shelter, and listened intently. Her heart began to beat, and a thrill of violent excitement flashed through her. There was not a sound! Yet, surely now she could hear something in the dim distance. A sound like the sharp crack of broken twigs and branches. Again, another sound, muffled, yet drawing nearer. The rapid padding of feet—unshod, or lightly slipped feet.

Hilda held her breath, and drew back within the doorway. Instinctively she turned to a wide crack in the rotten wood, through which she could see, without being seen. Her eyes sought the twisting woodland path to the left, from whence the sound came. It was the Ghost's Walk, and led eventually to the house, about a quarter of a mile away.

The moon was rising higher now, and was shining almost vertically down upon the lake. It illumined the scene with a clear cold radiance, throwing light and shadow into sharpest relief.

The running, padded footsteps drew nearer, surely another moment and their owner would round the bend and appear in view. Fleet though they were, they suggested weariness. There was a decided limp in their action.

A deadly terror of she knew not what shook Hilda Davenant like a withered leaf assailed by autumn winds. The runner tore round the bend, coming on as if flying for dear life. Now the fugitive was in full view, and revealed as a man, or rather the ghost of what had once been a man. He was very tall, and strongly built, but worn to a shadow, and apparently

fagged out. Still he held on his way. Now, he had passed out of Mrs. Davenant's range of view, and barely conscious of her actions, she crept nearer the entrance and peered out as he approached.

He was quite close to her now, and as she stood transfixed, staring towards him, every drop of blood left her face, which became rigid with horror. One arm swung free as he ran, on his other side hung an empty sleeve. His face was gray, haggard and covered by a mat of unkempt black hair. His clothes hung in rags about his gaunt frame, and on his feet were tattered stockings.

She stood as if frozen to the ground, dizzy from unadulterated fear. Then the film gathering over her eyes cleared, the nightmare spasm clutching at her breath loosed its hold, at the violence of overwhelming shock.

The flying figure had stopped short, and for one long moment the wild, dark eyes, charged with an expression that curdled her blood, met hers in full recognition.

At that awful gaze the beating of her heart ceased. Surely the earth stood still too, surely the moon paused in her mounting! Then before she could call back her senses, before a word was spoken, he was off again.

She staggered back to the seat, and cowered into its black shadows. Had he recognized her? Yes! undoubtedly. She could tell it by that hideous stare of amazed loathing. She had changed hardly at all, since last they met twelve years ago. She had recognized him instantly, yet he had changed enormously.

She threw her hands before her face. More in thought is suffered in eventful moments than in years

of tranquillity. Yet, such lightning flashes of time color whole lives, and turn the tide of destinies.

Only about thirty seconds had elapsed. Terror leapt alive once more. The running feet were returning, and she strangled the scream, that rose in her throat, and hid the whiteness of her face, while she shrank farther into the shadows, which engulfed her so completely that it seemed as if she herself were but a shadow absorbed and lost in deeper shadows. He was returning to kill her.

For a second it flashed across her that the tread was not the same. Another fugitive was passing, but the blood throbbed in her brain, the roar of the sea sounded in her ears. She could not reason, or be sure of anything.

The momentary terror had passed so swiftly it was like an illusion of the senses, leaving her stunned with nightmare thoughts. Yet she knew it was no nightmare she was passing through. Stark reality had to be faced. Nothing could soften or avert it. This was the hour she had awaited, and instinctively she had known that from it there was no escape. The veil which hid the ominous shadow had been torn aside, it was real flesh and blood. This had been the destiny mapped out for her. She felt nothing now but a dreary desire to die, for she had rushed upon her fate in its most humiliating aspect.

Again acute terror rushed back. The silence was broken. She listened intently. Was he returning? How could she escape? for he had gone by the road she had to traverse, and she was compelled to hide in her dark shelter till he had gone clear away.

She bent her head forward, and strained her ears in an agony of apprehension. Yes! There was something moving at the other end of the little lake. Again came the shrill scream of startled birds, a hare sped swiftly past the door. Though she could see nothing, because of a bend in the path and the tangled foliage, she could clearly distinguish the brittle noise of cracking ice, a heavy splash of water, and a low, discordant medley of sound, confused and intermittent, rising, falling.

"It sounds like a dog fight in the distance," she thought, shudderingly. She dared not move from her hiding place. Yes, he was still there. What was he doing? What were those sinister confused sounds? Would he come back? The terror of his return overpowered all other thoughts, all clear reasoning. If he did return he would surely kill her. Of that alone was she certain.

Hours seemed to pass, dragging interminably. The strange sounds had died out, and a blessed period of deep silence reigned once again. In reality but ten minutes had slipped by, and she was about to steal forth to reconnoiter, when she became aware, for a certainty, that some one was approaching. The footsteps were assuredly not his.

She clutched at the door posts for support. A weight was on her head, and all her numbed limbs. She was no longer quite certain of anything.

The steps were dragging and slow, the halting steps of a very old, unshod man, and peering out she saw gradually emerge from the black shadows, not that tall gaunt fugitive, with the wild dark stare of recognition, but an aged man with down drooped head, leaden limbs and spiritless air. The moonlight fell full upon him

now, and enveloped him in glittering raiment, for as he came closer she saw, that from head to foot he streamed with water.

“Geoffrey Thorpe!”

She was certain of the identity of the man she suddenly faced. Clarity rushed over her. She moved from the shadows and barred his path.

“What have you done with Mark Thorpe?” she demanded.

He was standing as if rooted, like the stark trees around him. The day of judgment had dawned. That imperious question came from an archangel’s trump, calling him to his just doom. He raised his haggard eyes, and looked straight into her face, a pale, beautiful accusing face, and she noted on his a quivering, deadly pallor. There was neither tragedy nor pathos in his gaze, only pity, which trembled in his voice like a condemned soul brought to justice.

“I have killed him,” he replied, with dull leaden brevity.

“You have drowned him in the lake?”

He looked again at her darkly. “He is drowned in the lake. A one-armed man cannot swim, but I never meant to kill him. We fought near the edge, we slipped on the frozen ground as we grappled. We both fell in, and he clutched, with his one hand at my foot as we sank together. I struck away his hand with a desperate effort. I would have saved him, but I was choking. He sank again. What matters? I too am a dead man.”

His voice was dead and expressionless. His face, white as a corpse against the black shadows, was devoid of feeling. He moved slowly, silently and painfully on, without another word or gesture. He wore

no shoes, only torn stockings. She watched him as his spectral form was swallowed up in the darkness of the woodland path.

For a long moment she stood still, then she looked down upon the frozen ground. A little pool of water had gathered, where a moment before he had stood.

CHAPTER XIX

THE ESCAPE

TOWARDS the close of the wintry day the robins hopped about the Ghost's Walk, and ate the crumbs Letty threw to them. It was her consolation and delight to make friends with all wild life, and even the savagery of "Steve," the chained watch-dog, had succumbed to her gentle blandishments, and watched for her coming morning and evening with the scraps she contrived to save for him at dish-washing time.

The frosty afternoon was far advanced, and she had lingered out of doors as long as possible, watching the glory of the sunset, but now her attention was distracted from the sky and the birds by the sudden furious barking of the dog.

"Some strangers must be about," she concluded, and scattering her last crumbs she struck off by a narrow path through the copse on her left. Mrs Greatrex had gone to the village, and would certainly not be back for another hour, and Geoffrey Thorpe was in his room at the other side of the house, absorbed in his usual occupation, whatever that might be. Letty had often wondered, but never discovered what kept him so busy. There was no one but herself to open the door, or to warn off stray tramps, and she hurried to-

wards the yard and back entrance, where "Steve" was chained to his kennel.

Suddenly, a most unusual sound caused her to stand still and listen. It came from the fringe of the dense wood which had grown up to the sides of one of the disused wings, and it suggested a piece of iron falling heavily from a height to the ground.

She strove to peer through the thick undergrowth, but it was too dense either to see through or walk through, and as she moved hastily on other strange sounds fell distinctly on her ear, and caused her to quicken her pace considerably. Some one was moving in the copse. She could clearly distinguish movement in a great tree overlapping the roof. There was a loud noise of cracking, breaking branches, succeeded by a heavy thud, as of a body dropping from a high tree to the earth.

Then, as she paused once more with a sudden thrill of alarm, there came to her the tread of stealthy feet creeping through the brushwood, and more cracking of branches.

The violent barking of "Steve" and the rattling of his straining chain increased her conviction that some intruder was about, yet for the moment she was more puzzled and vaguely curious than actually afraid.

Her residence at the Lake House had prepared her for surprises, she had always felt that anything might happen under that roof, but the coming of burglars whilst it was still daylight seemed an extremely unlikely contingency. Yet, what else could such sounds indicate? she argued with herself, as she hurried into the yard. Throwing the scraps to "Steve" who was violently excited, she entered by the back entrance, and made her way to the living room on the other side of

the house. For the first time she ran with natural vigor along the corridors, and without fear of disturbing the old man. Unceremoniously throwing open the door she ran in, crying out—

“There is some one in the copse! I heard him drop from a tree outside the left wing. Then I heard creeping, stealthy footsteps.”

The effect of her announcement was electrical. Again she felt a sharp twinge of fear mingle with her excitement. The ashy terror on her uncle’s face, as he started up from his seat and dashed wildly past her, set her heart beating, and her unstrung nerves quivering with nameless dread. She made a sudden movement to arrest him, but too late.

“Stay where you are,” he shouted, “disobey me at your peril.”

Before her feeble protest could reach his ears he was out of sight.

For a moment she stood still, feeling sick with apprehension and acute uncertainty, then she rallied her courage, and running into another room on the other side of the house, which commanded a view of the Ghost’s Walk, she threw open the casement, and thrust out her head as far as she dared.

The footsteps were clear enough now. She could distinguish her uncle’s tread; wonderfully swift, yet hampered by his loose slippers. How terribly eager he seemed! Terror lent him strength and agility. There was more cracking of boughs and undergrowth, as the feet of the intruder, no longer stealthy, rushed on. Suddenly, in a small clearing she caught a fleeting glimpse of two figures. One tall and gaunt, the other was Goffrey Thorpe in hot pursuit. Another second and both were lost to view.

Dead silence fell again upon the scene. Steve had ceased to bark. The sunset had faded out, and a full moon was rising behind the woods. The air was intensely cold. A hard frost had set in. She closed the window, and suddenly remembered that she was quite alone in the house. She began to reckon how long it would be before Mrs. Greatrex returned. Certainly not under another hour. She had started late, calculating on the moon to light her home. She never went out during the daytime.

There was nothing apparently to be done but wait patiently for Geoffrey Thorpe's return, and Letty decided to go to the kitchen and spend the interval there. The front part of the house was always kept closed in winter, and he could only re-enter by the back door.

She raked the embers together, and piled wood and coal in the yawning grate. Soon there was a cheerful blaze, and after lighting the lamp she drew a chair to the fire and sat down to think.

Who was the man in the copse, and what did he want there? Who had fallen from the tree, and why had he climbed it? Would Geoffrey Thorpe overtake him? If he did what would happen? What a bitter night for the old man to be out, and how mad he was to run after a stranger who, for all he knew, might be armed and desperate! She wished she had not allowed her excitement to control her. Perhaps it would have been better to say nothing, yet surely it was her duty to warn her uncle that an intruder was seeking entrance. Still, if she had broken the fact more gently to him perhaps he would have thought twice before rushing forth into the wintry night, without hat and overcoat, and with feet shod only in thin slippers. A strong inclination possessed her to go out and look

for him, but she remembered that he had forbidden her in most emphatic language to follow him.

No, there was nothing that she could do but wait, and occupy her mind with many conjectures. Yet, she was desperately uneasy. Her nerves were strung up to acute tension by the strange events of the last hour, and she was consumed with a desire to prevent her thoughts from dwelling on that old shadowy fear which lurked in the dark corners of the kitchen. Now there was another dread to be fought, a terrible foreboding of some coming evil.

From time to time she stirred the fire noisily, and looked over her shoulder at the shadows, and started violently as a half-burned log crashed on to the hearth. The minutes dragged on, and the ticking of the clock grew painfully loud. Why did not Geoffrey Thorpe return? What was happening in the Ghost's Walk? What would be the effect on the old man of this wild adventure? Was he lying, even at that moment, murdered—amid the dense brushwood of the copse?

The moon was well above the woods now, and fell in splashes across the great stone flags of the floor, and touched with silver fingers the rusty articles ranged on the walls and dresser. The clock burst into a loud whirr and struck. She did not wish to count the slow, emphatic strokes, but she did so mechanically. For how long had she been alone in the house? She hardly knew. Perhaps an hour, and her uncle had not returned.

She glanced round at the uncurtained window and her heart stopped, then bounded on again. A man's face was pressed close to it, peering in on her. She did not start or cry, though her very blood was chilled, she stood up calmly and quietly. Suddenly the face

vanished, but not before she had distinguished its owner—Geoffrey Thorpe.

Why did he not enter? A sound at the back door, and she wheeled round and waited. Dragging, slow footsteps in the flagged passage, then the door was feebly pushed open and he entered. Mechanically she noticed that he had lost his slippers, and that as he crept forward to the fire a path of water followed him. Every garment he wore was drenched through and through, but her thoughts were concentrated on the ashy pallor of his face, and the terror still alive upon it.

"I must change at once," he muttered thickly, through his chattering teeth. "Go and fetch me brandy from the cupboard and dry clothes; and I need you. My hands are helpless."

Letty, who had trembled at the mere falling of a log, was instantly steadfast, practical and full of resource. What a blessed relief to be in action once more!

"You're wet through, uncle, much wiser to go to bed immediately. I'll fetch the brandy now."

She was answered by a deep groan, and he clutched wildly at her for support.

"What is it?" she asked gently, as with her arms firmly round him she drew him to a chair. "Are you hurt?" His answer, as he sank back was almost inaudible, so violently did he chatter and tremble.

"No! Yes! I've been bruised and strained my hands. I'm a dead man. Fetch brandy and help me upstairs. Keep her away from me! Ah!" His voice rose to a quivering shriek, as he stared wildly at the pool of water gathering about his feet. "She'll see that and guess."

"No, she won't. I'll wipe it up. Wait till I fetch the brandy."

In a moment or two more Letty returned, and with the greatest difficulty he took a few sips of the stimulant. His hands, scratched and torn, trembled so greatly that he could not hold the glass, and she was obliged to put it to his lips.

Then she gently assisted him to rise. "You must let me send for the doctor," she suggested, as they moved slowly to the door.

Her words roused in him a fierce strength. He broke away from her, staggering dangerously.

"I forbid it. I dare you to do so. Never shall he enter with my consent."

Again she put her arms about him, soothing him gently with reassuring words. "It shall be as you wish. I promise, uncle. Now come to bed, and I'll fetch you hot bottles. Do come."

He yielded suddenly to her persuasions, with a child-like obedience, and she assisted him with the greatest difficulty to climb the stairs. He was very far spent, if not utterly done. Once within the room he ordered her to lock the door, and collapsing into a chair he watched her heap coal upon the fire and stir it into a blaze. In another moment or two she had ripped off his torn, sodden stockings, coat and waistcoat, and laid his dressing gown by his side.

"Now I must leave you whilst I fill the hot bottles. I won't be long. Can you slip into your dressing-gown without help?" His head had dropped forward on his breast. She had to bend low to catch his answer.

"Good girl! Yes; but wipe up the water first, and don't let her come near me. Lock the door, and take the key as you go out."

She promised and ran downstairs, entering the kitchen like a little whirlwind. She recognized the truth, that her uncle was in a parlous state. The first thing she saw was Sarah Greatrex standing by the fire warming herself composedly. She held up her skirts ostentatiously, as if to avoid contact with the water upon the floor.

"Your master is unwell. I am going to take him hot bottles," Letty quietly announced. The woman made no comment, nor did she attempt to assist Letty as she filled the stone jars from the kettle Sarah had set upon the fire. Just as she was about to leave the kitchen again, Mrs. Greatrex spoke.

"Who did you say was unwell?" Her voice was ominous but controlled, and she glanced significantly at the door.

"My uncle." It was the first time she had spoken of him to Sarah by that name. She had always referred to him as Mr. Thorpe. Now, the very fact of her claiming relationship, added to the strange events of the night, gave her a sense of authority, and made her feel as if he really did belong to her.

Again Sarah made no response, and she returned to her uncle's room and locked the door. He had contrived to divest himself of the rest of his clothing, and was huddled up in the chair wrapped in his dressing-gown. Swiftly she turned down the bed, and again with the greatest difficulty, she contrived to get him into it. He signified his determination to remain where he was, but the extreme circumstances gave her courage to insist, and he submitted to her at last, and she had the satisfaction of seeing him safe between the blankets, with the hot jars at his feet and sides. Violent convulsions, and shivering fits still shook his

wasted frame. His teeth rattled in his head, and a brilliant patch of fever now burned on each hollow cheek. With patient insistence she administered a little more brandy, and covered him warmly.

As she was collecting his wet clothing he essayed to speak again, and she hurried to his side and bent over him.

"Do you know where Harry is?"

"Yes, uncle."

He seemed to rally all his strength with a tremendous effort.

"Take the key that is hanging round my neck, and hang it round your own. The box it belongs to is in my room, and is not to be opened till I tell you, or at my death. Send a telegram to Harry bidding him come here immediately. Take it to the gardener's cottage now, and ask him to go with it immediately to the post office. It will be sent the first thing in the morning. Are you afraid to do this?"

"Of course not, uncle. But I don't like to leave you. Sarah is back again."

"Sarah is no use. She would refuse to take the messages. Lock my door, and take the key with you. Come back to me as soon as you can, and don't admit her. Your promise!"

"I promise, uncle, and Harry will be here to-morrow," she replied, and putting her hand beneath his head she slipped the string from his neck.

He said no more. His eyes were closed, and his breath was becoming more and more labored. As the sense of his acute danger was forced upon her she made another attempt to gain help. The diffidence she had always felt in his presence was gone. She put her lips to his ear.

“Won’t you allow Jones to call the doctor when he goes to the village?”

A furious exclamation burst from him. “Can’t you see, girl, that all the doctors in Christendom could do nothing for me? Leave me alone. Do as you are bid.” Then suddenly his harsh voice softened, “Don’t desert me, Letty. If I’ve been harsh to you, forgive me. I’ve no one but you.”

For the first time she bent her lips to his forehead, but he moved uneasily, as if evading the caress.

“Trust me. I won’t leave you a minute longer than I can help,” she whispered back. As she locked the door and put the key in her pocket, she silently commended him to the care of the Almighty.

CHAPTER XX

DEATH COMES TO THE LAKE HOUSE

AFTER her hurried walk to the gardener's cottage Letty returned with all speed to the Lake House and reëntered the kitchen. She felt dog tired from all the wild emotions she had passed through, and in view of her uncle's serious condition, and the probability of her having to remain with him all night, she deemed it wise to prepare a meal for herself.

Her first act was to mop up the water which Sarah had not condescended to remove, and which still formed a pool on the stone flags. Mrs. Greatrex had divested herself of her outdoor garments, and sat knitting composedly by the fire. She had obviously comforted herself with a meal, as the remains were still on the table, and the kettle was steaming on the hob.

Letty had decided to treat her with supreme indifference. If she chose to be civil, well and good. If she chose to be rude, she would be ignored. As she made no remark the girl fetched herself a tray, and an egg which she proceeded to boil, meanwhile cutting herself some bread and butter. When the tea was made she carried it into the deserted living-room. Though she had been in the kitchen for quite ten minutes Mrs. Greatrex had not condescended to

open her lips once. "Yet she must be aware that something very unusual has occurred," thought Letty, "and she can't have found out what condition uncle is in, as his door is locked and the key is in my pocket. Has she no curiosity to learn what is wrong, or where that pool of water came from? What a strange woman she is; how hard and unfriendly!"

Letty found herself very helpless in such an emergency as now had overtaken her. During the war her pupil had required all her attention, and she had performed no V.A.D. work like most English girls. She knew practically nothing of illness, and now she was deprived of the support of a doctor. All the responsibility was thrown on her shoulders, but as there could be no shrinking of its weight she must bear it to the best of her ability.

She finished her meal as quickly as she could. The room looked and felt so strange to-night, without that familiar figure seated beneath the portrait. The single lamp left all the corners in black shadow. The air seemed filled with beings who whispered together of dark secrets. The portrait assumed a more arrogant and dominating attitude. It seemed to her distorted fancy that Mark Thorpe stepped out of the canvas, and strode about the room in a new-found freedom.

She fled precipitately from her morbid phantasies, and softly entered her uncle's room, locking the door behind her. The fire had died down, and she proceeded to build it up again and light the lamp, which she turned low. Geoffrey Thorpe was apparently sleeping, a disturbed, uneasy sleep. His breath came in rasping, rattling sighs, and one hand plucked ceaselessly at the coverlet. She bent over him in acute anxiety, as he lay with his face to the wall, a mere

shadowy wreck in the great four poster. She foresaw that the coming night would be a terrible ordeal for her, without the assistance of doctor or trained nurse—indeed without any assistance whatever. Supposing he should die in the night? For some moments she considered the advisability of seeking Sarah's aid, but two factors militated against her adopting this course; her solemn promise not to admit the woman, and the strong probability that she would be quite impossible to deal with, and would either refuse any assistance, or take matters entirely into her own hands, and exclude all from the sick-room but herself. Had she, Letty, any right to abandon her uncle, after having given her promise to remain with him, and keep Sarah at arm's length?

After ten minutes anxious thought, she decided upon a course of action. It was clear that she must sit up all night with the sick man, and there were several articles, such as a kettle for hot water, milk, brandy, with which she must provide herself before her vigil actually began. She decided that when collecting those articles downstairs she would tell Sarah exactly how matters stood, and see what effect this intelligence produced upon her. It was unlikely, but just possible that she would offer assistance, or even some helpful suggestion. This course of action Letty proceeded to carry out immediately.

Sarah still sat in her deep armchair by the kitchen fire, knitting industriously. Her face was set like a flint. She did not raise her eyes, nor make the faintest sign of recognition.

"I find Mr. Thorpe extremely ill, and I am going to remain with him all night. Unfortunately he won't allow me to send for a doctor."

Letty paused a moment, watching the woman closely. Not a flicker of the eyelids, not a second's pause in the knitting could she detect.

"I must take this kettle upstairs with me as I may need hot water in the night, and some milk and brandy."

Still no response of any kind, and Letty went off to the larder to collect what she required. When she returned and all was in readiness to take upstairs, she looked straight at Mrs. Greatrex and said—

"I believe my uncle to be so seriously ill that he may quite possibly pass away in the night."

For a second or two she waited for some reply, some display of interest—none came. A flame of anger arose in her, and she burst out with irrepressible sharpness—

"Have you nothing to say?"

Sarah did not trouble to raise her eyes. "All I have to say is—it is possible," was her laconic answer.

It was as she thought. No assistance or sympathy was to be gained from that quarter, and she left the kitchen and Sarah alone with her evil nature. In another half hour her preparations for the night were completed, and she returned to Geoffrey Thorpe's room and locked the door securely.

He was awake now, and his pallid lips were moving. He turned his glassy eyes towards her with the terror in them still.

"Don't leave me again. He might come and stare down on me, all white and wet. I'm a dead man," he kept on muttering feebly. She thought his mind wandered, and she induced him to swallow a little milk mixed with brandy, then she busied herself about the room for a few moments, making him as comfortable

as she could. Morning would dawn again, and the day would bring Harry, was the blessed thought she kept ever before her, and mentally she prayed continuously for help and strength to do right.

The convulsive shivering had ceased; a raging fever had followed, and the sick man's breathing was even more labored than before. He seemed much more prostrate. His eyes entreated her, and she bent over him again.

"She tried the door whilst you were out with the telegram. Have I told you what happened?"

"No, Uncle."

"You might leave me if I did. What of Harry?"

"He will be here to-morrow. I promise not to leave you, no matter what you may tell me," was her soothing response.

Again his lips moved, and they said distinctly the words he kept repeating, "I am a dead man. I am a dead man."

She put an old feeding cup she had found to his lips, and he drained the contents eagerly, as if he craved for more strength. She thrust pillows behind his back, supporting his head on her arm. Instinctively she felt that he would breathe more easily if propped up high.

"If you believed that I was a murderer surely you would leave me, but as there is a Judge above I tried to save him, I wished to save him. How, then, can I be a murderer?"

She had to bend low to catch the whispered words. All her senses seemed to become abnormally acute, and to concentrate themselves on the ashen misery of his face, on his distraught eyes.

"If I had not struck off his hold on me we would

have gone to the bottom together. His one hand held me like a vise. The water was deathly cold, and coated with ice. If my life would bring him back I would give it. The terror of it all, how it haunts me! I can't get away from him, always his eyes are glaring into mine. Sarah would kill me, if it were not for you. I implore you don't leave me—if only I had more time, but I'm a dead man."

His eyes were aflame with wild supplication. They stared over her shoulder and round the room, searching the dark corners for something he dreaded to see.

"I will not go away."

Her heart was throbbing heavily. She was sick with the creeping fear that enveloped her, but she struggled out of its clutches. She was forced to hide her thoughts, however antagonistic they were, and she commanded her voice into level calmness. Geoffrey Thorpe might be a murderer, but he lay there *in extremis* under her hands, and at her mercy. He must be helped, even if his muttered confessions were not the ravings of delirium, but the literal truth.

He lapsed again into uneasy sleep, and she sat down by the fire. She had no inclination to sleep. Her brain was on fire, her thoughts working chaotically at high pressure. Gradually they concentrated into one firm conviction.

Geoffrey Thorpe had killed the fugitive, whoever he might be. He had drowned him in the lake. That accounted for the dripping garments, the torn and scratched hands, the awful prostration after that appalling conflict. "His one hand!" The three words clung to her memory, and forced their significance upon her brain. Had the murdered man but one arm? That would account for his sinking. He couldn't

swim with one arm, and he had been left to drown. As she thought of that one-armed victim, lying stark at the bottom of the lake with the ice creeping over him, she shuddered convulsively, and experienced the mental nausea of intense repulsion.

Midnight struck—one o'clock—two o'clock! Now and again the watch dog moaned eerily, and the owls called. In the room there was no sound but that stertorous labored breathing, the ticking of the clock, and the crackling of the fire, which from time to time she replenished. With a thrill of dread she saw, on looking round, that the man on the bed was awake, and his eyes were fixed upon her.

"Drink! Drink!" he panted. "Give me strength to speak. I can't be silent longer. My soul is in hell."

She put the cup to his lips and he drank greedily.

"I killed Mark Thorpe. I hid him here—a prisoner for years. I want to tell Harry all. I've written out the story of my crime. It is in the box—you have the key—I thought he was too weak to escape—but he must have been shamming weakness to deceive me. When you gave the alarm you terrified me—you cried out, 'There is some one in the copse. I heard him drop from a tree outside the left wing.' I knew instantly what that meant. He must have loosened one of the iron bars—I had ceased examining them, believing he was too weak to tamper with them. He dropped from the branches of the old oak in the copse—I chased him with the swiftness of despair, and came up with him by the lake—we grappled together—but he was no match for me—he was weak from long confinement, and his one arm was a hopeless handicap in any trial of strength—I would have brought him back to his prison, but as we grappled and fought like mad

dogs on the icy edge of the lake we over-balanced and fell—crashing through the thin ice—and into the icy water—locked together in deadly combat—no one saw us. I dreamed that some one did—that a white angel stood in my path and called me to account—she said, “What have you done with Mark Thorpe?” and I answered truthfully, ‘I have drowned him’—then I went on my way, and the dream passed—ah! for the sake of the name let my crime be buried in my grave.”

His wild eyes were riveted on her face in an awful appeal, but she could not meet them. A mysterious force had been given to her, and she strung together, like beads on one string, his gasping, disjointed utterances. With perfect clarity she envisaged the scene.

“Mrs. Greatrex knows you kept a prisoner here,” she said in a dead level voice.

She felt him shrink and cower away from her, shudderingly.

“She will be silent for her own sake,” he whispered hoarsely. “Ah! if only I were not failing so fast—for the sake of the name—for those Thorpes who will come after—suffer the grave to close over my sins. The deadly cold of the water numbed my brain, and every bone of my body. The struggle was for life or death, and the madness of self-preservation was on me. I——”

He ceased whispering. A wildly tossed spirit stared from the pale windows of his anguished soul. His head fell heavily back on her arm.

She withdrew it, and laid him back straight on the pillows. The whistling, labored breathing drowned all other sounds, till the fourth hour struck harshly from

the stable clock and she looked round the awful dreariness of the room.

Geoffrey Thorpe no longer lay still. He tossed in a wild delirium, and muttered ceaselessly and incoherently. His throat rattled horribly, like the rough shaking of the dice, and one hand kept plucking at the coverlet. "It is the hand of a murderer," she thought, and she saw those claw-like fingers wrench off the clinging clasp, and saw the one-armed man go down into the dark waters for the last time. The ice must have closed over the place, and perhaps the stockman's children would slide upon it. Once she had seen his boy fishing there, where the herons came to feed, and the moorhens wove their wattled nests. They would be unconscious of the dead face staring up at them from the bottom, for children are too freshly sent forth from the hand of God to conceive of murder. Would he be found? Would they bring him in, knowing by instinct that he rightly belonged to the Lake House, had indeed been its rightful owner? Yet, whose thoughts would hark back to a man—dead to the world for long years in a distant land? How would they account for what might any day be found in the lake when the frost went? Surely, every stray man who trod its brink, or saw the trees bending mournfully over it, must know the terrible thing that had taken place last night.

Only last night! It seemed to Letty that weeks must have passed since she sat in the kitchen waiting for Geoffrey Thorpe's return. At last she knew the secret of the Lake House—understood the terror of it that had haunted her by night and day. Those footsteps were Geoffrey Thorpe's, and he was on his way to feed his prisoner. That key hanging on his finger

was the key that locked the captive's door. That cord across the entrance to the corridor was a precaution, not a necessity; the cords barring the other passages were but blinds.

She looked again towards the bed. The terrible face with the staring, glazing eyes, worked and twitched hideously. One hand plucked the coverlet, the other was raised, the fingers spread out wide and then clenched again. There was no longer the struggling breath, but the dice box shook and rattled continuously. The devil was playing with God for his soul, she thought almost indifferently. She had been sitting there all night, but she felt no weariness. Hours had fled by unheeded. She only sensed some great change which had come over all things, and robbing her of her youth made her feel quite old. When morning came how could she go down and face the woman who knew of that crime which now had been revealed, the woman who knew of that cruel captivity, and who, utterly lacking human compassion, had suffered it to be?

An arid sense of duty urged her to rise and approach the bed, the cup in her hand. She held it to his lips, but there was no response, only that hideous rattle. With an heroic effort she dipped her fingers in brandy and moistened his lips. His mouth sagged open, his eyes stared with no speculation in them. A wave of terror swept over her. Was this death? She had never been in the dread presence before. God! what an endless night! Would dawn never come? "God help me," she prayed in mental anguish.

But, as she stood there looking down on the bed a calm stole through her, a great change of thought swelled in her heart. Her uncle's obvious sufferings

touched her acutely, with a pitying wistfulness. What was such a life as his had been but one long torment, a hell ten times worse than his miserable prisoner's—a never ceasing vigilance, a perpetual dread that the slender hair might break, and the sword descend upon him? If he lived, and the truth were known what would be his fate? But he would not live, death would save him. The hair had snapped, the sword had fallen. So weird and unnatural did the whole tragedy appear, that sitting there by the fire Letty strove to arouse herself at times from her horrible musings, and throw off the vapors of a dreadful nightmare. But the tragic face was there on the pillow, and those clenching hands and the dice box rattled on. Outside lay the lake with the one-armed man at its bottom, and the smooth ice spun by the bitter north for his shroud. She was in the turgid stream of reality. She could not forget that one arm—had she been able to do so she might have felt less horror.

The morning wore on, but daylight was still afar off. She drank a little milk, made up the fire and laid her head back on her chair. In a moment she was asleep.

A sound at the door awakened her abruptly. Some one was knocking, and she jumped up, staring into the unfamiliar space, striving to recollect where she was, struggling with the awful memory of the past hours. The long night was over, and the gray dawn penetrating the room looked unspeakably chill, gloomy and mournful. The pallid light of a snowy morning was filtering through the blinds, and fighting against the black shadows. The utter silence struck instantly, ominously on her strained senses. The dice box rat-

bled no more, the throw had been made. Her eyes turned to the bed. Geoffrey Thorpe lay still, with gaping mouth and staring eyes, but yet he was clothed by what was august.

She went swiftly to the door and threw it open. Sarah Greatrex stood there.

"It is half-past seven," she said sullenly.

Letty looked at her tranquilly. "Your master is dead," she said, and went away along the corridor to her own room.

CHAPTER XXI

WARBURTON'S TASK

AMBROSE WARBURTON was smoking his pipe after early celebration and breakfast. The sun was shining brightly into his study. A slight fall of snow had taken place during the night, but the storm had passed over, and the day promised to be a perfect winter one, of hard frost and cloudless sky.

He opened the morning paper and glanced down its contents, but before he could be immersed in the latest labor worry the door opened, and his sister entered.

"This note has just been sent up from Little Glentworth. It's marked 'immediate.'"

Ambrose took it, and saw with a little thrill of pleasure that the handwriting was Miss Howard's.

"Let's see what she says. Is any one waiting?"

"Yes! A garden boy. He says there's an answer."

Emily walked to the window and picked a few dead leaves from some geraniums growing there. She wheeled round on hearing a perplexed exclamation from her brother.

"There! you may read what she says. It isn't marked private, and she seems to have no secrets

from you," he said, handing her the note. "What do you make of it?"

"Something terrible has happened to Hilda. Will you come to see us as soon as you possibly can? In desperate need of your advice.

"AGNES."

Emily folded the paper and laid it in front of him. She was suddenly and deeply perturbed with a sense of impending calamity.

"When will you go? This is something very urgent," she asked gravely.

Ambrose was already drawing writing materials towards him. He glanced at his watch.

"At half-past ten," he muttered, scribbling rapidly.

There was silence between them for a moment or two, whilst his pen flew on. A knock sounded at the door, and Emily went forward and opened it. The little maidservant stood outside, with a scared expression on her chubby face.

"Please, Miss, Mr. Thorpe of the Lake House is dead, and Jones has come to tell the vicar."

Ambrose had raised his head as certain words fell upon his ear.

"What's that?" he called out sharply.

Emily signed to the girl to go away and closed the door again.

"Jones from the Lake House has come to tell you that Mr. Thorpe is dead, perhaps——" she hesitated a moment, "perhaps the note and this unexpected news have some connection."

"How could they?" he answered abruptly. He was

staring in front of him in a perplexed manner. Was something big and terrible coming at last into his uneventful life?

"I feel there is a vital connection."

He grasped the purport, rather than the words she uttered. He was conscious of a similar sensation, though he did not say so.

"Ask Jones to come in here at once."

Emily found the garden boy from Little Glentworth, Jones, and the maid in low, but excited confabulation. She dispersed the little gathering, by conducting Jones to the study and closing the door.

"What's this, I hear?" asked Ambrose, after a quick "Good morning."

"Mr. Thorpe, 'e died at dawn. Got a chill, so Mrs. Greatrex says. I only seed 'im well yester mornin', but Steve, that be the watch dog, was 'owlin' somethin' fearful in the evenin', and I 'eard 'im again in the night," stated the Gnome emphatically.

"Didn't you know Mr. Thorpe was ill, and was no doctor called in?" questioned Ambrose.

Jones shook his head. "A queer thing did 'appen about eight o'clock. Miss Letty rapped at my door, and gave orders from Mr. Thorpe to take a letter immediate to Ann Binns, the postmistress. I did as I were bid. It were a fine moon night and 'ard frost. It were addressed 'Postmistress, Great Glentworth,' and marked 'immediate', and the writin' were Miss Letty's, anyway it weren't Mr. Thorpe's. I weren't inside the Lake 'Ouse after ten yester' mornin', when I took in wood and coal, and I were workin' after dinner in the gardens, right away from the 'ouse. I 'eard Steve clear enough. This mornin' at eight o'clock Mrs. Greatrex says to me, 'Mr. Thorpe died of a

chill at dawn. Go and arsk yer wife to come and lay 'im out.' ”

The Gnome paused to observe the effect his statement was having upon the vicar. He had reason to be satisfied. Ambrose was listening to him, and looking at him, with profound interest and attention.

“Were you told to come here?”

“No, Vicar, I weren't, but I thought as 'ow you ought to know, seein' that Miss Letty's all alone.”

A gleam of lively sympathy sprang into the vicar's eyes. “You were perfectly right, Jones. I thank you. Is that all you have to tell me?”

“That's all, sir. I 'aven't seen Miss Letty, and I knows Sarah Greatrex ain't company for any one. Turned 'er back on me, she did, after givin' 'er orders.”

“Well, Jones, go now to the kitchen and wait there. I'll give you a note to take to Miss Letty, which you must try to deliver into her own hand.”

Jones pulled his forelock and departed, and Ambrose and Emily looked at one another.

“Strange, unexpected news, which may have great tragedy lurking beneath. Coming hard on the heels of this note.” He tapped Miss Howard's appeal significantly. “I begin to agree with you. There's a connection. I'll go at once to Little Glentworth, and then on to the Lake House and try to probe events.”

“And I will go and prepare a room for Letty. You will bring her back with you. Harry will certainly arrive some time to-day. He shall have a room also; he may prefer to come here rather than remain in that desolate house,” Emily announced briskly.

Ambrose looked at her thoughtfully. She was a

great help to him, with her ready grasp and quick intuitions.

"Right! We may take it as a certainty that Letty will be with us to-night; meanwhile I need hardly say to you, be discreet, dear. Wait one second, whilst I write the notes."

She sat down and waited silently, while her mind worked rapidly. Mr. Thorpe dead! Harry was now master of the Lake House property, and Letty would very soon be mistress there. Probably the note she took to Jones and bade him deliver was a telegram to summon him. Why any mystery? Why had she not told Jones that her uncle was ill? She must have known of his illness at that hour, and what had caused such a sudden collapse? Geoffrey Thorpe did not go out. What had caused his chill? Emily hated mystery. Her nature was extremely frank and open. Now she felt uneasy and uncomfortably excited.

"There are the two notes. One for Miss Howard, the other for Letty. See that they are delivered as soon as possible. I'll take my bike, and be at Little Glentworth almost as soon as the boy," said Ambrose, breaking in on her anxious reflections.

Afterwards Ambrose wondered what had made him go first to Little Glentworth? Surely it would have been more natural to visit the house of death, and the lonely Letty, before obeying that imperious call for help emanating from Miss Howard.

He was shown immediately into Mrs. Davenant's boudoir, where he found both ladies. They welcomed him with a totally unusual gravity and pre-occupation, and he sensed tragedy in their atmosphere.

"Sit down by the fire. What we have to tell you

will take some little time," said Agnes gravely. "We are going to confide absolutely in you, because we both have a deep sense of your trustworthiness and sound judgment. Firstly, I warn you that what we have to say is of a startling and terrible nature."

Warburton betrayed no surprise. He had come with the expectation of receiving startling disclosures.

"I'm to be depended upon, so far as keeping your confidence is concerned. As to my sound judgment—well! I can only do my best to merit your trust," he replied quietly. "Tell me bald facts first, please. We can fill in detail after."

"Last night, about half-past four, Mr. Thorpe of the Lake House murdered a man called Mark Thorpe, who was my husband."

It was Hilda who spoke. Her words were cold and clear. They seemed to fall from her pale lips like drops of ice. She looked, not at him, but straight before her into the middle of the room.

He slowly repeated her words, one by one, in silence to himself. What did they mean? He sat leaning his head on his hand watching her intently. She seemed perfectly composed, though she was very pale, and bore evidence of suffering under some great strain. Perhaps never had she looked more beautiful than now, wrapped in a dead white cashmere shawl, and devoid of all ornament.

"Will you give me as briefly as possible your evidence for this accusation?" he asked gently.

"I was present on the border of the lake when the crime was committed. Though I did not see it actually done, I heard it, and saw both murderer and murdered. When Geoffrey Thorpe turned to creep home alone I confronted him in his streaming garments. I demanded

to know what he had done with Mark Thorpe. His reply was, 'I have drowned him.' My husband only had one arm, and was therefore at a serious disadvantage in a conflict, even with a much older man. I went afterwards to the spot where the murder had taken place. It was easily found, because of the trampled ground and broken ice. I saw nothing, I heard nothing more, thought I remained on the bank some time. There was not a ripple on the surface of the big hole torn in the ice. It must be frozen over again by now. I came to the conclusion that life was extinct, and that Mark Thorpe lay dead at the bottom. Then I got home somehow. I hardly know how; I was utterly spent."

"How did this man, Mark Thorpe, whom you say was your husband, come to be in the neighborhood?" Warburton spoke after a long silence, during which he strove to assimilate her terrible statements. They seemed to him as the dreams of insanity.

"I can't answer that question. I can only offer the supposition that, either he was kept concealed in the Lake House, or he made a sudden dramatic appearance there. I was married to him in the United States fourteen years ago. We could not live together. At one time I had reason to believe he was dead, then I received a letter purporting to be from him, saying he had lost an arm in a shipwreck. This letter I received six years ago. We have never met again since we parted in America, until last night, when we stood face to face. The recognition was mutual. He was the real owner of the Lake House property. Now, what is to be done to Geogrey Thorpe, who has murdered him in order to retain his hold on the lands which were never his?"

Ambrose Warburton answered the tragic question very quietly.

"The Almighty has already made reply. Geoffrey Thorpe died this morning at dawn."

The pale tragedy of her face did not change. For hours she had been feeling with all the intensity possible to her deep nature. This new development did not even astonish her. She made no answer, and Ambrose fell into deep thought, out of which the women did not seek to rouse him. What wild, improbable phantasy was this story he had listened to? he asked himself. Yet he knew it was true. He thought of the idle babblings he had so often heard, as to the mystery surrounding Mrs. Davenant and Agnes Howard, and as so continuously happens in this world, the reality was infinitely stranger and more poignant than any fiction emanating from the imagination of man. He knew he was now called upon to bear an enormous responsibility. He felt the weight of it already, and showed it in his face and voice when he spoke again.

"Before offering any opinion, or taking any action, I must think over the revelations I have heard from you. They must be weighed, and much doubtless remains to be added to them. I am going from here straight to the Lake House to see Letty. I must also see Harry Thorpe, who will surely arrive to-day. You must give me permission to confide to Harry all that you have told to me."

"You will have to tell both Harry and Letty," said Agnes decidedly. "Hilda has no desire to make any mystery, or hide the truth. We leave matters entirely in your hands. Please use your own discretion. We are both rather anxious about Letty, the more so now that we know the old man is dead."

"I will bring her back to the Vicarage with me," answered Warburton, and then he briefly related the little he knew of the old man's death. What was obscure had now become clear. Geoffrey Thorpe had not long survived the conflict, and the submersion in the icy water of the lake. The hand of man had been balked of its prey, but the hand of God had stricken him down with merciless rapidity and severity.

"I must ask you for the loan of your car to-day," went on Warburton. "Let it be at the Lake House in an hour, and I will try to find time to see you again this evening. Now, I must go and see Letty. I will do my best for all concerned, but I require time and quiet to think out this awful tragedy. One most important admonition I leave with you both. Be silent, and admit no outsiders."

"We will abide by your advice. I am hardly in a condition to receive callers," replied Mrs. Davenant bitterly. "Believe me, we realize to the full the difficulties lying ahead, and the terrible responsibility we are asking you to bear, but both Agnes and I feel you are the only soul in this world we can turn to in this crisis—the only man in whom we can place implicit confidence and trust."

At any other time such an assurance would have brought great happiness. It would have proved to him that his ministry was not all in vain, but now so great was his perturbation of mind that he scarcely grasped the purport of her words. His thoughts were already concentrating on that other interview awaiting him at the Lake House, and he shook hands hurriedly and took his departure.

When left alone the two women sat silent for many minutes wrapped in thought. Hilda lay back in her

chair with closed eyes. She had not slept all night, and looked utterly exhausted. Agnes had sat up with her, and looked scarcely less fatigued. She bent over her friend and kissed her gently.

"Try to rest now, Hilda. I am going to get a breath of air in the garden."

Mrs. Davenant opened her eyes to meet those bending over her.

"Do not let us forget, Agnes, that the worst part of this miserable tragedy has still to be told."

Warburton mounted his bicycle and rode away through the hard frozen, thin coating of snow that was spread over the country. The sun shone brilliantly in a cloudless sky, but the vicar was in no humor to enjoy the beauties of nature. He was profoundly agitated by the startling events which had so abruptly stirred the pool of his quiet life. He felt how great was his responsibility, holding as he now did such tragic secrets. Would they remain secrets, or be blazoned to the world? With horror he thought of the Press gloating over a new and thrilling series of sensations. As to his own part in the drama of events he could form no conjecture. There was so much he still must learn, in order to fill in gaps and present to his mind a clear sequence of the tragedy.

Harry must at once be told the truth, so far as he knew it. Letty it might be possible to spare, yet surely she must suspect something of what had actually occurred. Consumed by anxious thoughts he reached the gates of the Lake House, and stopped to draw breath and look about him. There was no sound, the silence of snow was all about him, stretching white seas, a wavelike procession of hidden furrows fading into continual white foam. The faint howling of a

dog called him back to life again, and he stared about him with deep interest as he proceeded slowly along the unkept drive.

When the old black and white timbered house rose suddenly up before him, involuntarily he uttered an exclamation of utter surprise. Its dilapidated grimness was veiled beneath a glittering mantle of purest white, and long sparkling icicles dropped from, and draped the lead pipes and eaves. A fairy palace stood before him, in place of the gloomy abode of death and abominable crime.

He passed round to the back door, throwing a kind word to Steve who was barking violently. Letty had told him that in winter the front of the house was kept closed, and seeing no one about he opened the door and walked in. A long, stone-flagged passage lay before him, and traversing its length he found himself in a square hall, on to which several doors opened.

As he stood uncertainly looking about him, one of the doors opened and Mrs. Greatrex confronted him.

He bade her "Good day," quietly. "I have come to see Miss Thorne. I am aware that Mr. Thorpe is dead," he explained.

She had not spoken yet, and he saw a dull red rise over her sallow face.

"I admit no one into this house. Mr. Harry Thorpe has not arrived. Until he does I am mistress here," she retorted defiantly.

Prepared as he was for unpleasantness should they meet, her rough attitude took him by surprise. He had not anticipated anything quite so forbidding as this.

"I am afraid that I must dispute that claim of yours, Mrs. Greatrex. You have never been mistress here," he returned quietly, but very decidedly.

His cool attitude appeared to infuriate her.

"How dare you dispute my claim?" she demanded, approaching nearer to him menacingly. "Perhaps it may satisfy you to learn that I am the dead man's widow. I am Mrs. Geoffrey Thorpe. Now, begone with you. When Harry Thorpe takes possession he can do as he pleases, but until he arrives my authority here is supreme."

She gave a movement of her arms, as if to sweep him off the premises, but he stood his ground. Her assertion astounded him, but he did not show it. The day had brought him so many shocks, and her truculence sharpened his wits. How thankful he was now that his first visit had been paid to Mrs. Davenant. His eyes lost their seriousness, and were bright with defiance, but he possessed great self-control as well as determination. He meant to take his own way, but he intended to gain it, if possible, by peaceable means.

"It is quite immaterial to me who you are, Mrs. Greatrex or Mrs. Thorpe, but I must demand that you confine yourself to facts. You have never been mistress here, nor has Geoffrey Thorpe ever been master here, for the simple reason that the real owner was alive until last night."

The effect of his words was even greater than he anticipated. She threw her hand across her mouth as if to arrest a scream, and her face blanched to the pallor of death. Her black eyes, riveted on his face, were terror stricken.

"Go back to your room and remain there," he commanded sternly; "your crime has yet to be dealt with."

Without glancing at her again he struck off through another corridor to the right, which he trusted might

lead him to Letty. At the far end of it he saw her standing, awaiting him.

"Oh! I hoped it was you. I heard Steve barking," she cried in a broken voice, as she ran to meet him with outstretched hands.

She guided him to the empty living-room, where Geoffrey Thorpe's papers still littered the table, at which for so many years he had sat. The white reflection from without searched the dark corners, and lit up the portrait of Mark Thorpe, who now lay drowned at the bottom of the lake. It seemed to Letty that the expression had changed to one almost of contemptuous triumph. "I gained my liberty at last," he seemed to say, "such liberty as none can ever deprive me of again."

They sat down side by side on a couch, and it was with deep distress he noted the ravages made upon her face by the ordeal she had been through. As he looked at her he had no doubt that she knew all there was to be known. He noted also that her condition of strained nervousness and tense mentality made her afraid of every word she uttered.

"You look desperately tired," he said gently; "have you had any sleep?"

He saw fear creep into her eyes, and she let them fall upon the restless hands in her lap.

"No, I couldn't sleep. I sat up all night with uncle."

"Where was Mrs. Greatrex?"

"I suppose in bed," was the confused reply. "You see uncle wouldn't have her near him."

"Or a doctor either," suggested Warburton. "Had he any idea of his danger?"

"Yes! he knew that he was dying."

She was twisting her shaking fingers in her handkerchief, and seemed on the verge of tears. He felt the strong necessity of relieving the tension and putting her at ease. Now, she was in an agony of fear lest she commit herself by word or gesture.

"I want you to remember, dear Letty, that a clergyman is used to receiving the most private confidences, and that I am to be absolutely trusted with anything you may have to tell me. Believe me I can help you. As no doctor was called in, directly Harry arrives he will send for Williams to certify as to the cause of death. That must be done, and I wish you to promise that from Harry you will keep back no detail, however small. There must be no secret locked up in your breast, under the belief that loyalty to the dead demands silence. The dead belong to God, not to man."

She was staring at him with wide, terrified eyes. "Secret! What secret do you suspect?" she whispered thickly.

"I know what you feel to be the most terrible secret—the crime that brought about your uncle's death," he returned gravely. "No matter for the moment how I know it. Does Mrs. Greatrex know what killed Geoffrey Thorpe?"

She was agonized, but her sincere soul threw subterfuge most thankfully aside. Her heart quailed on learning that another shared her secret, yet his words brought her enormous relief. The barrier was down.

"I don't know. We have not spoken together, but I think she must suspect. She is aware that uncle came back streaming with water, and she knows that—that the other man is no longer in the house," she faltered.

"Did you know who this man was, Letty?"

She looked round at him with a flash of surprise. "No, how could I know who he was? I didn't know a man was hidden here, though I felt something terrible in the atmosphere of the house. Now I do know who he was, for uncle confessed to me during the endless, terrible night. He said that his prisoner must have pretended to be weaker than he really was. He had not expected him to attempt to escape. He has written a full confession which I have got safely hidden away."

Warburton breathed a sigh of intense relief. "That will be a document more closely concerning Harry than any one else," he said. "What time do you expect him?"

She told him of the urgent telegram she had sent the night before, and the reply which Jones had brought back from the post office. Harry would arrive at one o'clock.

"I will wait here to receive him, and I will take you back with me to the Vicarage. Needless to say you can't remain here," was Warburton's kindly rejoinder. "Though Harry is now the actual owner of the Lake House property there will be many difficulties to settle. One of those difficulties has been definitely disposed of since I entered this house, Letty. I refer to Mrs. Greatrex, who claims to be mistress here, until Harry arrives."

"That is no new attitude," returned Letty, "she always has been mistress here."

"Yet, without a shadow of claim," sternly retorted the vicar. "Now, if you will think for a moment, you will realize that even Geoffrey Thorpe had no real claim to be master. How could he have a claim whilst Mark Thorpe lived? For a very few hours he was

legally master—literally between sunset and dawn. With his death his brief tenure passed to Harry. Had you any conception that your uncle had married Mrs. Greatrex?"

The speechless amazement on her face convinced him that she had known nothing of this, and he proceeded.

"I have effectually silenced her for the time being, by bringing home to her that she was accessory to the crime of imprisoning the actual owner of the Lake House, of usurping his functions, and appropriating his revenues. Harry will deal with her as he thinks best. I have told you of this new disclosure, only in order to assure you that you may meanwhile act as authority here, and as Harry's deputy. Make any preparation you choose for his comfort on arrival, and Jones will take your orders now, and assist you in any way. My advice to you is, treat Mrs. Greatrex, or Mrs. Thorpe which she claims to be, exactly as if she did not exist. There must be many little domestic matters to arrange, such as provisioning the house, which she will certainly no longer attend to, and which will be necessary to Harry's comfort during the next few days, and you must call in help, for Mrs. Thorpe will be in no humor to go about her ordinary household duties. A room ought to be prepared for Harry to use if he chooses. He will have an enormous amount of work to do. Will you undertake to act at once as mistress here?"

As he spoke he saw with satisfaction the effect his words were having upon her. She was beginning to grasp the real situation. Out of a lethargy of shock and horror she was rousing herself to attend to duty, and rise to the emergency. Her mind would thus be distracted from tragedy, and turned into healthy and

useful channels. When he rose to go and look his last upon the dead Geoffrey Thorpe, she rose also with purposeful energy, eager to carry out his instructions and suggestions, and make preparation for the arrival of her lover.

CHAPTER XXII

AGNES HOWARD'S REWARD

IT was nine o'clock before Warburton found time to go again to Little Glentworth. His day had been crowded with such startling and terrible revelations that he felt absolutely worn out in mind and body. Still, a hidden urge within prompted him to learn at once any further details, to obtain certain missing links in the Lake House tragedy before he slept. Added to this, he was fully alive to the fact that the ladies at Little Glentworth would be deeply anxious for any further news he could supply.

Harry had arrived in Mrs. Davenant's car, greatly perplexed, but made aware by the chauffeur that Geoffrey Thorpe was dead, and after a few minutes passed alone with Letty the three sat down to a simple meal. Mrs. Geoffrey Thorpe did not appear, and Letty stated that she seemed to be very busy packing up, and had not opened her lips whilst they were alone together in the kitchen. Then followed an hour or two of painful disclosures, in which Letty recounted all she knew, and Warburton supplemented her information from Mrs. Davenant's statements of the morning.

The close connection between Hilda Davenant and the murdered man was amazing enough in itself, but his imprisonment for years in a wing of the Lake

House, without any living soul outside having even suspected that he still lived, seemed to Harry so preposterously improbable that he wondered at moments if he was passing through some hideous nightmare. Sometimes he asked himself if Mrs. Davenant was sane or insane, in claiming Mark Thorpe as her husband. Was she under some wild hallucination when stating her experiences of the previous evening?

But there was Letty's account of the man dropping from the tree, of the alarm she had given, and of Geoffrey Thorpe's terror, which drove him forth in pursuit of the fugitive. There was that return alone in dripping garments, and the confession that followed before he breathed his last. Geoffrey Thorpe had possessed no knowledge of Hilda's relationship to his captive. Even the astute Mrs. Greatrex had failed to suspect the connection. It was very unlikely, judging from Hilda's statement, that Mark Thorpe had escaped drowning. Later her words would be fully corroborated. Their long and careful sifting of available facts came to an end at last, and it was decided that Geoffrey Thorpe should be buried with his forefathers in Little Glentworth Church. His crime, they all agreed, must be dealt with later, when the full volume of facts relating to it had been compiled.

Harry decided to remain at the Lake House, in the room that Letty had labored hard to prepare for him, and where so much work awaited him: not the least painful duty falling to his share being an interview with Mrs. Geoffrey Thorpe, before she took her final departure.

Warburton fully agreed with Letty and Harry that if the crime could, without injury to others, be buried in the old man's grave, it would be best for all parties

concerned, but there could be no final decision until the widow of the murdered man had been consulted.

It was six o'clock before Letty and Warburton were free to drive off to the Vicarage, with the promise to return on the following afternoon, and bring with them Mrs. Davenant. The confession of Geoffrey Thorpe, now in Harry's safe possession, would then be read aloud. Letty had been put to bed at once by the compassionate Emily, and was vastly comforted by Harry's nearness and the kindness of her friends. Then the brother and sister had a long confidential talk whilst they sat at supper, and before Ambrose set out once again for Little Glentworth.

On arrival he saw that he was expected, and he was at once shown to the drawing-room. Agnes Howard was standing up alone by the fire awaiting him.

The ruddy light falling upon her showed her very pale, and dark rings round her eyes spoke of great anxieties. Assuredly some heavy trouble lay at her heart. She did not speak or move till the door was closed behind him, and he had advanced towards her. Then she held out her hand.

"This is good of you. You must be so weary; but I've always trusted you from the moment we first met, as I've trusted no one else in my life. Hilda has had to go to bed with a splitting headache, and has deputed me to be perfectly open and frank with you, as regards her past. I will be equally frank regarding my own."

She motioned him to a chair, and they faced one another, but he turned aside his head and shaded his eyes with his hand, that she might not see the pallor that had overspread his face. He cared for her so deeply that he shrank with dread from this coming interview. Her past! What was she about to tell

him? Then he sensed in her silence a tiny thread of doubt creeping through her mind, and he rallied all his forces, thrust aside his love for her and grasped the stern realities of the hour. The look in his eyes, as they now met hers, reassured her.

"What I am going to tell you is the latter history of two women's lives, lived in defiance of orthodox morality. Above all, I must impress upon you the absolute fact that I have stood willingly by Hilda through all her troubles, and will do so to the end. I have in fact condoned, nay even encouraged in her certain actions, that to you will doubtless seem very terrible."

She paused, and he shot her a glance of encouragement as he leaned forward, deeply attentive to her words. He had command of himself now, and she could no longer dismay him.

"I am accustomed to tragic disclosures," he reminded her gently. "That they come chiefly from those in a humble walk of life does not make them less interesting to me. I try to understand human nature and its infinite complexities, and to remember my own painful deficiencies. Is it really your considered wish to confide in me?"

Her eyes dilated as she watched him closely. She was about to reveal herself in a light which she believed would be hateful to him. She experienced some pre-science of the poignant regret that would always haunt her life, unless it remained in touch with his, yet she did not flinch. As yet she did not bear him love, but there was in her, stronger than she knew, a reverence, an admiration, a respect for him that drew her to him with an indefinable attraction, and which might sooner or later deepen into love. Already it was sufficient to

make her realize that profound regret would darken her future, should he become estranged from her.

"It is absolutely necessary that I confide in you, in order to throw full light on the crime just committed. We have looked on you as our sincere friend. As you know, we have no male relatives to turn to in an emergency. There will be many details upon which we must seek advice. Before I go further, Mr. Warburton, do you accept the trust?"

He threw back his head, his whole expression that of vigorous strength.

"I most willingly accept any trust you may honor me with, Agnes, and with all my heart and soul and the help of God I will advise and aid you to the best of my ability."

Unconsciously, the name by which he thought of her passed his lips. That, and the glow of strength in his voice and eyes heartened her exceedingly to go forward to her task. There was no mistaking his sincerity.

"I thank you," she said quietly. "Now I will begin with the early life of Hilda Davenant. That was her maiden name. She was born of poor parents in New York, and she always possessed great beauty. At an early age she went on the stage, and made considerable progress in her profession. She remained absolutely virtuous, according to the orthodox conception of the word, until after she became the wife of Mark Thorpe, fourteen years ago. They were married in Washington, where she was playing.

"At that period I lived also in Washington, with my only brother, Cecil Howard. We were British born, but owing to my brother having made a large fortune in America, he eventually settled there, and when our parents died I joined him and kept house for

him. He was a delicate man, and required the care of one who really loved him. His was a wonderful nature, great, generous, large-hearted, and wide-minded, and I adored him. I found his house in Washington was the *rendezvous* of the intellectuals of the city, and a very delightful society was gathered around him. Mark Thorpe happened, by a mere chance, to be brought to our house one night, by one of Cecil's old friends. He was the rage at Washington at the time and extraordinarily attractive to women. As a new and charming acquisition one met him everywhere and he returned all hospitality with a splendid lavishness which we believed to be justified by his means. A more plausible adventurer, a more consummate impostor, does not exist in history.

"It was true that he came of ancient stock, and was owner of a fine old property, but he had squandered the greater part of his means, and was already living on his wits, though none suspected this at the time of which I speak. We learned after that he was obliged to leave England, because of several actions which brought him into conflict with the law.

"I believe he could easily have married one or other of our great American heiresses, but he professed to care for me and we became engaged."

She paused in her narrative, as Warburton uttered an involuntary exclamation of astonishment. So extraordinary a statement did not seem plausible in view of what he already knew.

A sad little smile flitted over her face as she proceeded.

"It may seem hard to believe, yet for a time I was very happy. I really cared for Mark Thorpe, and immensely admired his bright intelligence and quick

responsiveness. He found it easy to make any woman love him. Then came the first shock. I received an anonymous letter, warning me that he was paying devoted attention to the beautiful young actress, Hilda Lambert, the name under which she played. I said nothing of this to Mark, but I had him watched. The warning was confirmed. A day or two afterwards I received a letter from him, telling me that he had been secretly married to Hilda Davenant.

"When I told my brother of all this I was shocked at the effect it had upon him, and all my own troubles instantly became merged in his. It turned out that he was madly in love with Hilda, and had believed that his love was returned. He had hoped to make her his wife."

A quiver of deep emotion crossed her face. She stopped speaking for a moment, and her whole attitude was exhausted and drooping. Warburton was listening intently, absorbed in the story she told.

"A great and terrible ordeal, but you rose triumphant over it," he said gravely.

"Yes, over my own wounds; but, ah! how I suffered!" she continued calmly. "Time passed on, and rumor became busy with the affairs of Mr. and Mrs. Thorpe. It was said that he treated her abominably, and that he was penniless. With broken health she was forced to work hard for a living. Divorce was suggested, but he contrived to evade it. After eighteen months came the climax. Mark Thorpe forged my brother's name for a large amount. He was tried and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment. Hilda Lambert was left ruined and very ill.

"It was then that Cecil asked me to go to her, and see what could be done to aid her. You see, he loved

her still, and could not be happy whilst she was miserable. I consented at once. Though she had taken my lover from me I bore her no enmity, and were we not fellow sufferers? hers being far the deeper wound.

"I found her alone and quite broken. Her husband's behavior had estranged all their friends, and she had just given birth to a dead child. She was still lovely, but worn to a shadow. Our meeting was a strange one, and she began by demonstrating how she had been punished for her actions. The great fault in her character was thoughtless impulsiveness, and liability to be carried away on the wings of skillful argument. She had never ceased to regret her marriage, which she had rushed into, in a fit of pique against some fancied slight put upon her by my brother. Now she realized all she had lost in playing him false. We talked long and openly, and she told me how utterly weak she had been in Thorpe's hands. She was carried away by his singular charm and magnetic personality, but he tired of her at once, and she became hopeless and wretched. When she spoke of divorce he terrorized her.

"Gradually they sank into very low water, and when at last the law laid hold of him they were at their wits' end.

"On returning home I told Cecil all the details of our interview. He was deeply moved, and that night he asked if I would consent to her coming with us to our villa in the Adirondacks, where we proposed going the following week. He argued that we were now her only friends, and, if deserted by us, there could be but one end for her in her changed circumstances. He believed, from all he knew of Hilda, that there was a vast amount of good in her nature. In the days of her

success she had been noted for her warm-hearted generosity in helping poor and struggling artists. Finally, Cecil laid before me what amounted to a challenge. Dare we leave this soul to drift downwards, when it was so easy for us to lift her up? Again, I acquiesced at once. The unfortunate girl attracted me. I was intensely sorry for her, and I saw that upon this scheme my brother's happiness depended, though its dangers were at once apparent to me.

"I shall never forget that long hot summer, and the perfect happiness of those two. It was plain to see that they worshiped one another, that they were in perfect accord, and made to be man and wife. Then came the time when Cecil opened his heart to me again, and told me that their love had been consummated. He had done his best to persuade her to seek a divorce, in order that they might be married, but she resolutely refused. She maintained that her past was too tarnished to be linked openly with his, but she gave herself willingly to him in secret. I was not surprised by those revelations—what else had I anticipated? Subconsciously I had known how it must end, and his perfect happiness obliterated any scruples I might have had against continuing to reside under his roof. With my full consent and approval Hilda agreed to remain with us, nominally as our guest, and I continued to be absolute mistress of my brother's house. I willingly condoned what is called sin, and countenanced what was, in all but the legal sense a most united marriage.

"When we returned to Washington, Hilda was installed in a small house near our large one, and their mutual adoration seemed to give my brother new life. Her nature was so sweet and sunny, so unselfish and devoted, that I grew to love her dearly, and look upon

her as a beloved friend. Beneath that rather worldly manner which she has latterly assumed as a defense, lies the warmest heart that ever breathed. She required some one to love and to help. Now that she herself is freed from worldly anxieties, Letty has filled the gap.

“After two years of great happiness my brother died in her arms, of pneumonia. He divided his fortune between Hilda and me, and we elected to settle together in England. Then—nine years ago—came news from our Washington lawyer that Mark Thorpe had escaped from his prison, and had secreted himself on an English bound ship, which had foundered at sea with all hands.

“At length, Hilda rejoiced in freedom, but it was short lived, for, as she told you this morning, a letter arrived which she had no reason to disbelieve was from her husband. It stated that he was still alive, having been picked up by a vessel bound for the Mauritius. Whilst being hauled on board his arm was crushed, and had to be amputated. Finally, as you know, he arrived in England.

“Those were years of wretched uncertainty for us both. Though we had no knowledge of where Mark Thorpe lived he had discovered our whereabouts, and any hour he might have presented himself before us. Instinctively, I knew that even after suffering as she had, Hilda would never have had the heart to return him to prison, and I fully anticipated long years of blackmail. Up to now, it has remained an absolute mystery to me why he never wrote again or asked for assistance.” She paused a moment, and then added, softly, “All this must seem very terrible to you, and doubtless you think I have acted very wrongly.”

Her lips quivered and her voice trembled, but her eyes met his resolutely, fearlessly.

"No," he answered her very gently. "I only think that your actions have been marvelously human, in the highest sense of the word. You lost yourself in your love for others. Tell me. How came you to settle here? You must have known of its proximity to the Lake House."

"Certainly we did. In searching for a country home we heard of Little Glentworth, and Hilda determined to go and see it. Because of its nearness to the place she had an actual claim upon she decided to live here. She argued that it was always better to face the worst, and be prepared for it, and if Mark Thorpe was to turn up again she would know it at once, for surely it would be to the Lake House he would come. I believed, on the contrary, that this would be the last place in which he would show himself, so I readily fell in with her plans. We knew that Geoffrey Thorpe was in possession, and we had no desire to depose him. We concluded that, either he did not know of Mark's escape, or he simply went on holding the Lake House till its rightful owner claimed it. It was not to our interest to make any public or private inquiries. Latterly, Hilda developed an extraordinary attraction for the place, and would visit the lake in secret on frequent occasions. She told me she felt strongly that the culmination of her life's tragedy would be worked out there. She had nothing to go on. She simply felt convinced that something was going to happen there which would bring matters to a head, and clear up her life. She was quietly sitting there by the lake when the sound of running feet startled her. In another moment or two her husband stood before her—terribly altered, but recognizable. Before they could speak he was off again, tearing away for life and freedom, and

hotly pursued by his gaoler. Crouched in the shadows of the summer house she heard the conflict, without understanding its import. She was so terrified that Mark Thorpe would return and kill her that she failed to see the old man pass. She thought his footsteps were those of Mark returning. She first saw Geoffrey Thorpe after he had committed his crime, and when he stood before her, streaming with water, he answered her question by confession."

"He also made a confession during the night to Letty. There is also a written confession now in Harry's possession. He wishes Mrs. Davenant to come with me and Letty to-morrow to the Lake House to hear it read. Will she come?" asked Warburton.

"I am certain that she will. She has the right to know what her husband's fate has been during the last few years, and there is still the horrible fact to be faced that his body lies at the bottom of the lake. We hope and pray that the tragedy will not have to be made public, but right and justice must be done. Tell me about poor Letty. How is she?"

"Wonderfully calm, and now, I hope, sound asleep. Harry wishes me to marry them immediately. Meanwhile, she will remain with us and be married from the Vicarage." He rose. "It grows late," he said. "There is nothing more need be said to-night. We will meet again to-morrow. Will you express to Mrs. Davenant my warmest sympathy, and assure her I am absolutely hers to command. Now——"

He broke off suddenly, and as she rose and came to his side her face paled instinctively, at a sudden strangeness in his voice. She was still in doubt as to how her story had affected him.

"I will give Hilda your message, but what message

do you leave with me?" In her clear, honest eyes there was neither timidity or emotion, and he took both her hands in his. There was something in the grave dignity of his face she had never seen before; a new expression. There was love-making in every tone of his voice.

"Why are you afraid, Agnes, that I should judge you harshly? Is it not enough that no action in your past has come from coldness of heart, from any scheme of selfishness, from any base motive? Do you remember what à Kempis says of love, 'Nothing is sweeter than love, nothing stronger, nothing higher, nothing more generous, nothing fuller and better in heaven or earth'? The past is past, and we should no more hinder the development of the future than the forest lets the shed leaves hinder the spring grass from growing."

Neither knew how it came about, but for several minutes they clasped each other in silence. The solemnity of a great peace was upon them. She could hear the beating of his heart, and she thought how strange it was that each one of those deep pulsations meant love for her. Mysterious, inexplicable, sudden as it was, she knew that in that still embrace she had found rest for her soul. This was that one deep draught of life which she had waited for, through all the years of her early womanhood. To feel that she desired nothing so utterly as she desired this man's love, and to give him her soul and body in return, was that measure pressed down and running over which Fate had at last given into her bosom.

CHAPTER XXIII

GEOFFREY THORPE'S CONFESSION

IN the old living-room of the Lake House sat the four persons most intimately connected with its tragedy—Letty and Harry, Hilda Davenant and Warburton.

Though still a house of death it was impossible not to feel that much of its gloom had already been lifted with the passing of the usurper who had contributed so liberally to its evil reputation. The knowledge that for generations the Thorpes had been a very bad lot had early in life inspired Harry with the determination to amend this, and demonstrate to the world that a reformation had set in. Though much stern and unpleasant work remained to be accomplished, there was something in his vigorous youth and uprightness which produced a powerful influence on his weary companions. Besides, had not the wings of love touched them all in these latter days, lightening their burdens and flooding their souls with a new peace?

Whilst the robins sang without, and the clear winter sunshine flooded the room, Hilda Davenant told her story, quietly, truthfully, withholding nothing, extenuating nothing, but dwelling with glowing words on that period of her life passed in perfect happiness with Cecil Howard, and the pure unselfish devotion of his sister, Agnes. Of her brief married life with Mark

Thorpe she said but little. Harry and Warburton were able to fill in details, in the light of their own knowledge, and the grand unselfishness of Agnes Howard's actions threw an aura of sanctity over what was in so many respects a sordid story.

Though Hilda had claims, as the widow of Mark Thorpe, upon the Lake House property, she rejected all idea of setting them forth. Her strong desire was to see Letty and Harry installed there, and to help in its renovation. "Let us combine to sweep away the cobwebs and evil traditions, and restore the old conditions of prosperity and well-being which formerly characterized the ancient home of the Thorpes," she said, "and, in accepting my help, you will provide me with the future I have lacked. It will give me a vivid interest in life to help you both, whom I have grown to love."

Then Harry drew from its box the manuscript containing Geoffrey Thorpe's confession, and there was deep silence whilst its revelations were unfolded, and all doubt and fear banished by the light it threw upon the terrible past. "The paper is inscribed 'My Confession.' It is signed 'Geoffrey Thorpe,'" announced Harry, and at once began to read in a low, quiet voice.

"When I first inherited the Lake House property, on the supposed death of Mark Thorpe, ten years ago, I was just fifty-five years of age. I was by no means weary of life's amusements, and I continued to live my usual reckless, spendthrift existence. It was a pleasing novelty to me to be in possession of a fine property, and when Mark Thorpe went to prison the revenues had begun to accumulate once more, and I found myself the owner of a larger sum than I had

ever before handled. He left a will bequeathing everything to me, though I had heard he left a widow. She, I was given to understand, refused to have anything more to do with her husband, and had no desire to claim anything of his estate. I had enjoyed my inheritance for a little over a year, when, on the night of September the fifth, nine years ago, I was seated at the dinner table with two old friends, one on either side of me. It was twilight, and I sat facing the unblinded window, smoking and drinking some excellent port. Suddenly my eye caught sight of a face, pressed close to the glass looking in on us—in another moment it had vanished. I said nothing to my guests of this, for I wondered if this vision was the result of my having drunk too much, but in a few moments I felt so alarmed and uncomfortable I could bear the inaction no longer. I made an excuse for leaving my friends, and slipped out into the night.

“Peering about me I suddenly spied the figure of a man leaning against a tree, watching the house. Advancing towards him I saw he was in rags, and unshorn. His face had a lean, famished look, and one ragged sleeve was pinned to his shoulder—he had lost an arm. In spite of the tremendous change in him, and the years that had passed since last we met. I instantly knew that I was face to face with my cousin, Mark Thorpe, whom all the world believed to be dead. Though a mere wreck of his former self there was no mistaking the superlative good looks, that had helped to make easy his evil career. The fineness of his features, the brilliance of his dark eyes, the even row of white teeth, were still his possessions, though hardships had laid a heavy hand upon him. ‘You’ve got guests, I see. Otherwise I would have come in and

dined with you, for I'm starving and a fugitive,' he said cynically. I knew that my face betrayed me, and rendered superfluous the question I put, but I was at bay.

"'Who are you?' I demanded roughly. He looked at me deliberately, and laughed sneeringly.

"'Mark Thorpe, convict and owner of this property, as you know right well. I've still "time" to do, but I don't intend to be trapped. Hide me, and give me food and rest for a few days, and we'll come to some arrangement afterwards—I've not had a bed for weeks, and precious little grub.'

"He seemed to be indifferent to, or not to realize the terrific shock his resurrection had upon me. Mercifully he could not read my thoughts. There was no time for consideration—for the moment no one was about, but panic invaded me. I took him to the front door, and peeped in first to see that all was clear. The only sound came from the dining-room, where my guests sat smoking and drinking.

"We crept softly upstairs, and he was so weak from exposure and fasting that I had to assist him. I led him through the long gallery, and along a corridor in the left wing, which was a portion of the house unused. Half supporting his weak limbs, I drew him into a bedroom overlooking the copse, and shut the door softly behind us. As he sank down on the bed I caught sight of my livid face in a mirror, and wiped the sweat from my brow. I don't know why I brought him to that particular part of the house, but a voice kept whispering in my ear, and I obeyed its orders. The property belonged to this human wreck, tumbled in a heap of rags on the bed, but I was the real beggar.

"Did any one know that he had escaped death from

drowning, and that he was at large in England? From what he said in the garden I thought not. It never occurred to even me then to dispute his identity. I was so sure of who he was. Besides, to establish his claim would have meant his return to prison, and my having to surrender the property to the two old trustees who had handed it over to me when his will was proved, at his supposed death.

"Whilst I stood thinking he had raised his head, and was looking round him. 'Why did you bring me to this gloomy hole?' he demanded. 'Your guests are not so numerous as to fill the cheerful rooms. Whilst I lived here this wing was closed. I would not put a dog in a room barred like that'—he pointed to the stout iron staves that stood before the windows. 'If I remember aright, all the rooms in this wing are barred. They remind me too much of what I have so lately escaped to be agreeable.'

"'I brought you here because, as you truly say, you are a fugitive,' I said. 'Do you wish my servants and guests to know of your arrival, and who you are? In this wing you will be quite safe, and when you are strong again I will help you to go where you please. Rest and food is now what you require.' My argument jumped to his reason, and he nodded acquiescence.

"'Bring me food and a bottle of good wine. Then, for God's sake, let me sleep,' he implored.

"I left him, feeling I could safely do so, as he was too weak to move, and crept downstairs again. It was Sunday night, and everything was very quiet in the house. In a few minutes I had settled my friends in the smoking-room with wine and cigars, and then, on

the plea of having an important letter to write, I left them again.

"Stealthily I gathered together some food, and a bottle of port, and managed to convey them upstairs without meeting any one. Mark Thorpe had tumbled into bed, and thrown his rags in a heap on the floor. 'I will bring you others to-morrow,' I promised, as I watched him eat and drink like a famished animal.

"Meanwhile, in disjointed sentences he told me some of his adventures. Of his escape from prison with several others during a fire. Of his shipwreck, and his being picked up by a passing cargo boat bound for the Mauritius. In being hauled on board his arm was crushed, and afterwards amputated. Eventually, after desperate adventures and hairbreadth escapes, he made his way to England. I scarcely heeded his words: my thoughts were engrossed in the new forms taking shape in my brain. What did I care for his miraculous escapes? All that concerned me was the fact that he had turned up here alive—master of the Lake House, and in my power. All the while he talked he drank wine freely, and it rapidly began to tell upon him in his enfeebled state. Very soon his eyes began to close, and his head to droop, and he was in a drunken stupor.

"I left him safely in bed, and locked him in. The room was too remote for any drunken ravings to be heard, and the window was well guarded. All that night I lay awake striving to think out the best plan of action, and look the crisis straight in the face. A net seemed to be closing round me, from which there was no escape. It seemed to me as if my will power had passed entirely from me into the hands of another.

The mind of an unseen agent was spurring me on, and smoothing out a path for me.

"In the morning my guests departed, and with thankfulness I saw them go, then, just as I was considering how I could secretly convey some breakfast to my prisoner, Mrs. Greatrex, my housekeeper, entered with a tray, containing tea and bread and butter. I knew that my face had gone gray from pure, unadulterated fear, but I spoke carelessly. 'What is that for?'

"The look on her face made me shiver. 'For your guest upstairs. I suppose you don't want any one to know he's there?'

"'How do you know he's there?' I stammered.

"A crooked smile crossed her face. 'I saw you smuggle him in, and heard most of what you said. I was coming home from church, and saw a man leaning against a tree. I took him for a tramp, and was just going to warn him off when I saw you come out of the house, and look about you. Then I hid in the bushes and listened. I'm willing to be silent if I'm well paid for it.'

"'We'll talk together of this later,' I returned agitatedly, 'meanwhile, I'll take up the tray.'

"The woman said nothing more, and left me. I crept cautiously upstairs, meeting no one, and entered the room which had already taken on a ghastly significance for me. Softly I unlocked the door, and entered. Mark Thorpe was tossing in wild delirium, and as I saw the flames of fever on his hollow cheeks, the emaciated frame, the skeleton fingers of his one hand, I told myself all was well. 'He will not live; I will do him no wrong; with me he will have every care, and this room is better than a convict's cell.' Suddenly he

opened his eyes and seemed to stare at me, but there was no speculation in their wild appeal. I tried to induce him to eat, but failed—he was too far gone. I saw clearly, as I sat there watching him, that I would require assistance, and I saw no other way of safely obtaining it than to enlist Mrs. Greatrex in the service, and pay her highly for silence. Probably I would have to acquaint her with the full facts. For seven weeks Mark Thorpe hovered between life and death—meanwhile great changes had taken place in the house. All servants, except the housekeeper, had been dismissed, the reason given being my supposed illness. My habits were entirely altered, and I entered into the life of a recluse. The price I had shortly to pay for the silence and service of Sarah Greatrex was—making her my wife. During one agonizing day of anxiety we went to London, and were married at a registrar's office.

“Time passed on, and Mark Thorpe began to recover, but there was still no possibility of his escape, he was so miserably weak. Then began that course of crime for which I hardly dare hope to be forgiven. I satisfied to the full his craving for drink, until he became a confirmed drunkard. At first, he demanded wine from the cellar as his own property, to use as he pleased, and I resisted for his own good, but he became violent when those demands were not satisfied to the full, and soon I yielded, telling myself ‘he will soon drink himself to death and all will yet be well.’

“He spoke now hardly at all of his past, and of his wife never, beyond once admitting he had treated her brutally. There were times when his suspicions of me were wildly aroused, and he deeply resented being locked in; but I always endeavored to soothe him by the warning that he was an escaped convict, and that

here he was safe. 'If you leave me it will only be to go back to prison,' I told him, 'and only by revealing your identity can you get food and drink. Think what your life has been as a hunted fugitive.'

"Meanwhile I trusted to his drinking himself to death, and ending the misery of us both.

"Often I drugged his liquor, and kept him for weeks in a sodden stupor. Always he appeared to grow weaker, and his mind began to give way. Before eighteen months of his captivity had passed he was quite insane. He was easier to manage after that condition was established. I kept him liberally supplied with drink, cards and chess—even with books, which he never read. The deed was done past recall. There was no going back, but there was now hardly any fear of detection. So sure was I of this that, when my sister asked me to give house room to my niece, Letty Thorne, for a week or two, I welcomed even so slight a break in the dreadful monotony of my life. My wife strongly opposed Letty's coming, but the thought of seeing a new face in the midst of my grim solitude was not to be resisted, and when she arrived and accepted so quietly the habit of the house, I thanked God for the relief she afforded. When Harry Thorpe began to come about the house I instantly grew afraid. He was too wide awake to be safe, and I regret that I had to forbid his again setting foot on the property. He succeeds me as heir, and I am reconciled to the fact that he will marry Letty. I trust they may be happy, and that in the passage of time my crime may be forgiven and forgotten, but it may come about that for a time I leave him a terrible legacy. My life may close before the life of my captive. Useless to dwell upon this possibility. I have left to Harry Thorpe all the

accumulations of years, save a sum just sufficient to keep my wife in comfort, so long as she lives.

"I humbly implore Harry Thorpe to bury my crime in my grave. I have defamed and disgraced the ancient name of Thorpe. I have suffered terribly for the sins I now have confessed, and to God's mercy I commend my soul.

GEOFFREY THORPE."

CHAPTER XXIV

MRS. DAVENANT DECIDES

THE small world surrounding the Lake House had known too little of Geoffrey Thorpe to care very much whether he lived or died. Only Mrs. Hall's triumphant assertion, "Didn't I foretell his death before the New Year?" revived the flickering interest in his passing, the concensus of opinion being that Harry Thorpe's succession was an excellent thing for all and sundry. So useless a member of the community was better dead than alive, and a young couple would add considerably to the social amenities.

Even the discovery of the dead body of a one-armed, drowned man in the lake proved but a transitory excitement. Clearly this was some wretched tramp, judging by his clothes and emaciation, and doubtless he had lost an arm in the war. Such countless men were now without an arm or a leg, and it was natural to Harry Thorpe's charming nature to give this nameless stranger a foot or two of ground, formerly sacred to the ashes of the Thorpe family. Life had been very cheap during the last five years, and there were such numberless derelicts drifting about the world, that this nameless corpse aroused no suspicion and but little interest.

Only a few days after the burial of Geoffrey Thorpe his successor had discovered a dead man floating on

the surface of the water, and the unidentified remains had been reverently carried to the Lake House, where they remained until the coroner had held the futile inquest. Events, even in a country parish, now march with such incredible swiftness, that before one thrill could be really enjoyed another had superseded it. Popular interest was now entirely centered round the Vicarage, which was about to provide two weddings for the delectation of the neighborhood.

Letty's approaching marriage had been somewhat cast into the shade by the public announcement that the vicar would shortly take to wife the stately and wealthy Agnes Howard.

Letty was to be married from the Vicarage, and she remained there busily completing her simple outfit, whilst Harry resigned from his work in London and installed himself in his new home.

Mrs. Geoffrey Thorpe had not waited for the funeral of her husband, but had departed the day after his death for an unknown destination. Only too thankful to escape punishment for her complicity in crime, she could be trusted to remain silent. Upon that day Letty, Harry and Warburton entered the left wing for the first time, and penetrated the room which for so many years had been Mark Thorpe's prison. The two men would gladly have spared the girl from the tragic ordeal, but Letty resolutely insisted on taking her place by Harry's side. She was well aware that much of the work of obliteration to be done there was woman's work, and there was but one woman to whom it could safely be entrusted. Until all evidence of Geoffrey Thorpe's crime had been removed no stranger could be admitted to work in the house, and meanwhile Harry had arranged to sleep at the Vicarage and, with

Letty and Warburton, return to his property by day.

The window of the prison still stood wide, and outside it was one bar missing, which was safely retrieved from the ground below. The removal of all the bars was a task Harry felt must be carried out by himself, before the house was set in working order again. Luckily rust had done its insidious work, and the task would not be too hard, nor was there any pressing hurry for its accomplishment. For an hour or two the three worked at removing all traces of occupation, and the result was a bonfire in the yard.

Geoffrey Thorpe had to a certain extent been mindful of his captive's bodily comforts, and the state of the room was less terrible than they had anticipated, but still there were abundant evidences of a life lived in brutal durance. The last flickering sparks of reason had been secretly employed in preparations for escape. Probably, had those preparations been continuous that escape would have been sooner attempted, but there must have been long periods during which no effort towards freedom was made. The door of stout oak was protected, not only by a lock and key, but by a chain and padlock, roughly, but very securely adjusted. Geoffrey Thorpe had reason to believe his prisoner was safe, but the cunning of insanity had supplemented the normal craving for freedom, and Mark Thorpe had undoubtedly feigned a weakness beyond reality, and so thrown his gaoler off guard.

The efforts of Letty and Harry were next directed towards preparing a few rooms for their immediate use. Carpets were taken up and floors cleaned, and the beautiful old furniture re-arranged. Only by slow stages could the Lake House be restored to its pristine

glories, but that would be a labor of love to its active young owners.

In those days of preparation Hilda Davenant took an enthusiastic part. She constantly motored over to help in the laborious work of selecting what was valueless from the accumulation of letters and documents overflowing drawers and old dower chests. There were days spent in lumber rooms, which appeared not to have been entered for a hundred years, and huge cupboards to be overhauled, which were crammed with china and grand old silver, black with neglect.

Often, Harry and Letty whispered together of this strange turn of destiny's wheel, which had brought into active co-partnership Hilda Davenant. All this hidden away and forgotten wealth had, but a few weeks previously belonged to her husband. Even the reckless Mark Thorpe had once accepted the words "with all my worldly goods I thee endow," and Letty could not free herself from the feeling that she was really dealing with Hilda's property.

That lady had, however, no thoughts of possession in her mind, though very often, when discovering a piece of silver or china of great value, she had remembered her husband's constant lament that there was "nothing left of any value in the ramshackle old place."

Undoubtedly he had believed this, for a bachelor on inheriting a property rarely concerns himself with the worker's portion of the house. His own special quarters, and the pictures interest him, and possibly some obviously valuable pieces of furniture, but he leaves garrets and lumber rooms to the spiders and rats, and so misses much that is worth reclaiming. Mark had

raised money at various times by selling pictures by painters who at that period were the rage, but luckily his ignorance of art and what the house really contained, had saved very much for his successors. All he had really been interested in was the rent roll, and when that had failed to satisfy his reckless extravagance, he had heavily mortgaged the property. Much of this burden had been paid off by Geoffrey Thorpe during his years of seclusion, and Mrs. Davenant's munificent wedding gift was to be the total redemption of the existing debt.

In those days, passed amid the dusty treasures of the Lake House, Hilda regained much of her old gayety of spirits and buoyancy of mind. She was free at last, and in the presence of the lovers, who knew the secret of how lately she had been widowed, she had no need to assume a sorrow she did not feel. The sadness that would formerly have been inseparable from the loss of Agnes Howard as her devoted daily companion, was now eased by the fresh interests in her life which revolved so closely round Letty and Harry. She could look forward to the marriage of Agnes with equanimity, for there would really be no parting. The Vicarage lay but a stone's throw from Little Glentworth. Little Glentworth! When she thought of the Dower House her mind inevitably turned to Claude Carlton. He was home again on Christmas leave, and had called twice, but she had avoided seeing him. What was to be the end of that budding romance?

Mrs. Davenant had quite decided that she would never marry a second time. She had told her life's story for the last time, and to re-marry with a secret hidden in her heart never even occurred to her.

The recent tragedy had brought to mind so many

things that in the course of years had become vague and misty. That one glimpse of her husband's face had rushed back to memory his callous brutality, and the insults he perpetually had heaped upon her. The poignant agony she had suffered when he had gone to prison, leaving her friendless, penniless, and alone with her dead child, surged back upon her with the freshness of but yesterday. It required all her strength of mind to thrust those memories back again into their grim past, and to shut the door of life upon them forever. At last she was free and at peace, and only if she remained free could she forget. To marry again would be but to perpetuate the misery.

She told herself that the true ethical philosophy was to bring into the lives of others some, at least, of the ideal joy that for so short a time had been hers. Thus she strove, as much as was within her power, to take the place of parents to Letty and Harry. How often in her life she had thought, if all the world was simply kind, what a paradise it might be, and she took the keenest pleasure in carrying out the gift she so often had failed to receive from the hands of others.

Her nature was essentially hopeful and courageous, and experiences which would have embittered others only wrought in her new strength and sweetness. There had been a time, not so long ago, when she had thought very regretfully of her inability to accept Carlton's manifest intentions. Now that she was certain of her freedom, the tragic circumstances that had brought it about seemed to have robbed it of its value. Legally free she still would be fettered by that past, which was so blended with sordid

misery, unconventional happiness, and sensational crime.

"Mine is a story which can never be told again, and the proof of that is what you and I are about to do to-night, Agnes," she said, as the two women sat alone over the tea cups by the warm fireside, on the night of the Great Glentworth ball. "So entirely am I divorced from my past that ten days after Mark Thorpe's burial I am going to put on my best white satin frock, and all my jewels, and endeavor to enjoy myself thoroughly. Is that not the answer to your question—'will I eventually marry Claude Carlton'? So long as I am free I can snap my fingers at the world, but no sooner were I bound by re-marriage than my life would become a martyrdom of fear, lest the world should hit upon my past and injure my husband. Calumny can do nothing to me, but it could render miserable a life tied to mine."

"I know you are right and wise, Hilda, but I hate having to confess it," replied Agnes regretfully. "I had hoped that some day you would be free to marry a man you cared for. I feel appallingly selfish in leaving you, but——"

"Yes! there's a big but," returned Hilda tranquilly. "I'm convinced I'm wise to shelter behind it. I'm not the sort of woman Claude Carlton ought to marry. My past will always stream out behind me like a comet's tail, and I'd never be able to suppress it. It's too interwoven with the secret of the Lake House to be given away again. I have those others to think of, Letty and Harry. No, I prefer to be regarded as a mystery rather than as a scandal. Besides, I'm years older than Claude Carlton, and the perpetual conflict with that disparity is more than I fancy undertaking.

There's nothing so hard for a woman as to look younger than her face, and I hope I may never live to be called 'well preserved.' You've got no wrinkles because you've never had a husband. The two are inseparable. Think of it! Just as Claude arrived at the prime of life I would be well on into the sere and yellow. What an appalling struggle that would entail, oh! the utter weariness of attempting not to look like his mother. Picture to yourself our social career in ten years' time, when Claude would be only forty, and I would be—ah! well! we'll say considerably older. When we had a house party with no one over forty, and I, feeling age in all my bones, being obliged to get into my best corsets, my smartest wig and my latest dream of a frock from Paris, instead of a comfy tea gown and a boudoir cap! Think of the hours I should have to spend in my chemical laboratory filling in the wrinkles, and laying on the rouge, and after all my labors catching the aside of some naughty young minx, 'Poor old thing, how tired she looks. Why doesn't she go to bed and leave us?' No, my dear, I've seen it too often to try it on myself. It's not good enough."

Agnes laughed. She loved to hear Hilda return to her whimsical moods of gentle cynicism.

"You're a woman who will never have any age, Hilda. Men will be more or less in love with you when you're ninety. When beauty departs you can always remain a good pal."

Hilda made a little grimace as she lit a cigarette.

"The woman who has once been a charmer does well to avoid being only a comrade. There comes a time in every woman's life when she wishes to be treated as a reasonable human being, and possess her

bedroom as a secret retreat unto herself. I mean to be free to do my hair with a fork, if it pleases me, and go to bed at nine o'clock without having to lock my door. Makers of epigrams wouldn't acknowledge it, but there are women who were beauties in their youth and only ask for a plain old age."

CHAPTER XXV

"GOOD-BY, SWEETHEART, GOOD-BY"

MRS. CARLTON was standing at the top of the staircase, welcoming, one after another, the county magnates and the smaller fry, with the same indiscriminate friendliness.

The women had come in all the glory of new frocks, which happier times had justified them in ordering, and the old family jewels, which for five years had lain in the cellars of banks, had been taken out and cleaned for the occasion.

Many of the men wore "pink" and thanked God they had done with khaki.

Mrs. Carlton looked like no one else but herself, in the severity of her red velvet, her close-cropped iron-gray hair, and the single monocle screwed into one shrewd dark eye, but she had conformed to the importance of the evening by strewing a few fine diamonds amongst the laces at the throat of her long redingote.

The small dance had developed into quite a big ball, as every one within motoring distance had decided to emerge from the rust of war, and treat the invitation as a command; thereby doing honor to a family of old standing whom all liked.

Mrs. Carlton, with her extremely liberal views and independent nature, was an excellent hostess, possess-

ing that thoroughbred ease which disarms the most critical assembly. She had the knack of saying those few words of polite conventionality in a way which made her guests feel welcome, yet which ensured their making way for the pressure from below, as carriages and motors deposited their loads at the wide-flung doors.

By her side stood her son, well pleased with this splendid function, which had been of his ordering. He looked upon the whole affair as a duty he owed to the county, in their desire for some diversion amid the monotony of country life, and the severe restrictions and sorrows of the past. In a couple of days another ball, no less well provided, was to be given to the employees on the estate.

The great house was brilliant with light and color, and sweet with flower perfume. From the great drawing-room, never used but on such rare occasions, came waves of music, and through the great staircase window shone glimpses of the gardens lying bathed in cold, pure moonlight.

"A charming sight," remarked Lord Lester to Warburton, as they lounged against a balustrade, quizzing the various parties who mounted the stairs, watching the varied blendings of colors, the varied expression of faces, the glitter of jewels against the stately background of tapestry and pictures. "Is your sister not here to-night?" he asked the vicar, after congratulating him warmly on his engagement.

"No, she didn't care to come. She never dances, and she's very occupied with Miss Thorne and her approaching marriage."

"Ah! of course! What a change for the Lake House! A charming young couple who will be a great

acquisition to the neighborhood, I hear," returned Lester, genially. "I can't help being rather sorry for the beautiful Mrs. Davenant."

"You needn't," laughed Warburton.

Lester twinkled slyly. "Ah! you think she'll catch the prevailing epidemic and marry also."

"I am quite certain she won't," answered the vicar, with conviction.

Lester said no more. He was longing to stroll about the rooms and gossip with old acquaintances, but like Warburton, there was one woman whom he wished to see arrive.

There was another who watched eagerly for that coming, Claude Carlton. Hilda Davenant was late, considering it was a country affair, he thought impatiently, as a clock chimed ten o'clock, and the stream of new comers had very perceptibly thinned.

"I think we may leave our post now, every one seems to have arrived," said his mother.

The strains of music came floating out to them. It was on the tip of his tongue to remind her that the Dower House ladies had still to be accounted for, but he checked himself before the words passed his lips, and together they moved into the drawing-room. Dancing was in full swing, the house party had lost no time in getting to work, but he hesitated to dance himself. A nervous irritation possessed him. Hilda had answered his letters, but had evaded seeing him since his return. He was quite sure of his own mind, but not of hers. His chances were enormously improved by Miss Howard's engagement. To-night he would put his fate to the test. It would be easy to make an opportunity.

He stood watching the brilliant Saidie Hall jazzing

energetically. He admired the perfect figure in its glittering yellow sheath. Diamonds crowned her dark hair, and vied with the sparkling luster of her eyes.

"Here comes the beautiful Mrs. Davenant," said a strange voice behind him, and he wheeled round.

Hilda was entering with Lester by her side, in animated conversation. They were followed by Agnes Howard and Warburton. Mrs. Carlton had caught sight of them, and the women were greeting each other with the greatest cordiality, whilst several men hovered in the background, eager to petition for a dance.

Warburton and Agnes, directly she had shaken hands with her hostess, joined the dancing throng, and Carlton found himself standing before Mrs. Davenant, her hands in his.

"I thought you'd never arrive," were the first words he found to say to her. "Are you going to dance with me?"

"I hope so." Her lovely, laughing eyes met his. To-night she was the incarnation of gayety.

Lester moved away. He had heard the words, but the look which accompanied them was far more significant. "Poor Claude! He's pretty far gone. Got it badly! How will it end? I think I know enough now to check anything so rash as marriage," he said to himself, as he made his way to the side of the Lord Lieutenant's wife, who was a distant relation.

"Let us start dancing right away," suggested Carlton, but even as he spoke the music came to an end, and the crowd began to thin at once, as the dancers streamed out into the cool corridors. He drew her arm through his and whispered, "Give me at least half a dozen dances." Various claimants were now

surging up, and there had been no time to lose. They would dance the next together.

Pushing their way through the chattering groups he drew her along the corridor, where they would at least be out of ear-shot.

"Now," he demanded, "I want you to tell me honestly why you've never let me see you once, though I've been home for a whole week?"

She smiled back at him whimsically, perfectly prepared for the attack.

"Honesty's a wretched virtue, Major Carlton. One never calls a woman honest who has any manners. We reserve the epithet for those of whom we have nothing good to say. Still, I like to be truthful. I had other things of more importance to do."

"Things that you liked better?" he insisted.

"Things that I disliked extremely."

"I want you always to be honest with me," he said, with a sudden gravity.

She maintained her smiling attitude of frivolity. "I wonder? Do you realize the misery it would cause if every one made it a virtue to parade themselves before their neighbor's horrified eyes in their true colors? Are any of us perfect enough to invite the world to look upon us as we really are? Supposing you told every woman you met what you really thought of her clothes and her complexion?"

"And supposing you told me what onerous duties prevented you from seeing me when I called," he retorted, laughing in spite of his serious mood.

"You wouldn't believe me if I did," she returned primly. "Now let us cease sparring and begin to dance."

They returned to the ball-room, and many pairs of

eyes followed them. The women were interested in Mrs. Davenant's fine jewels; the men were interested in her great beauty and grace. She valed with all her heart. As a young actress she had trained indefatigably, now the pure delight of movement returned to her, as she glided round to the rhythm of a first-rate band. Her partner was all that the best of dancers could possibly desire, and she uttered an expression of genuine regret when the music ceased.

"That was heavenly, and how well you dance! I shall look forward to perhaps one more turn later on; but it is your solemn duty to dance with no woman twice to-night, out of the many who are your guests."

"Solemn duty be damned!" thought Carlton as he surrendered her to her next partner. If she imagined he would be thwarted by conventional rot of that sort she was much mistaken.

The crowd on the floor was great now, and after a few turns with Mrs. Hall they paused to take breath. A few elderly women sat at one end of the room near their hostess, but every man under eighty was dancing with the zest of twenty.

"How times have changed!" laughed Carlton. "Why, before nineteen-fourteen all these old busters would have been chaffed off the floor; but now their energy seems quite natural."

Saidie's eyes were following Hilda and a young diplomat, who was one of the house party. The music had glided into the hesitation valse, and many couples drew to the side to watch the few who were equal to the new movement. Mrs. Davenant and her partner were perfectly matched, and their dancing was something more than a drawing-room performance.

"I've never seen her look so beautiful, and where

on earth did she learn to dance like that?” burst out Mrs. Hall, in a spasm of admiration. “Her jewels must be worth a big fortune. The late lamented Mr. D. must have been worth a mighty pile of dollars. They say Miss Howard has ten thousand a year. I wonder where it came from.”

“Better ask Warburton,” retorted Claude crossly. “I’ll wager it comes from no tainted source. The vicar isn’t the man to share ill-gotten gains.”

After supper, as the ball wore on to a close, Carlton began to weary of it. He had only succeeded in dancing twice with Hilda, despite all his efforts, and repeatedly he had been balked of sitting out with her. Whenever he approached it was only to find her surrounded, or sitting in a corner engrossed in conversation it would be impossible to interrupt. In despair he ordered the band to announce an extra, and at once began to search for her.

He had not far to seek. She was with the Master in one of the small sitting-out rooms, and he proffered his request and bid Captain Hall be gone, with the unceremoniousness of old friendship. When they were alone he made no movement to return to the ball-room, but threw himself down on the sofa by her side.

The beating of her heart quickened. All evening she had told herself these were her last hours of happiness and youth. When she had parted from Claude Carlton she would have said good-by to all the lighter side of life. She would have had her last love affair, and her feet would be set upon the path leading to sober middle age. A turning point in her destiny was before her. There was no escape, and she braced herself to meet it.

“Life’s a queer thing,” he was saying seriously.

"I thought I'd enjoy this dance awfully, and now it's almost over I'm happier now than I've been all night."

His eyes were looking straight into hers, and she had some difficulty in dissimulating the effect his words had on her.

"The truth is, I'm never happy away from you, Hilda. I've loved you from the first moment your voice fell upon my ears, though at first I didn't realize what had happened to me. There's but one thing in my life now, and that's my love for you. That's madness if you like. I'd have said so too, before I met you. Mine is a tale you must often have heard before. So lovely a woman as you are doesn't go through life without having crowds of men at her feet. Now! What are you going to say to me in reply?"

As she listened all the brightness and warmth went out of her face, and her lips parted, as if to draw breath was oppressive. His words vibrated with intense earnestness. They pierced her as no other words of supplication had ever done. She had expected this interview, known it must come, yet how much harder it was than she had anticipated.

"You give me great pain. All I can trust is that your love for me is of such sudden birth that it will die as rapidly."

He interrupted her brusquely.

"You mean that you give me no hope?"

She looked straight into his eyes. She was too truthful to conceal from him that, under other conditions she might have allowed her heart to go out to him with a softer impulse than mere friendship.

"It is terrible that through me you should suffer. Do not think me without feeling, without sympathy——"

"These are not love," he broke in again.

"I cannot give you love, because there is that in my life that forbids it. There is no more to be said."

So greatly did she desire his deliverance that she could no longer speak calmly. There was a ring almost of passion in her voice.

"I'm ready to swear there is nothing in your life that you need be ashamed of."

It was not an interrogation, but an affirmation.

"Think me guilty or guiltless, as you will. I cannot answer you," was the quiet reply.

"You are innocent enough, whatever circumstances may have arrayed against you, whatever shadow of evil may have fallen on you. Is it not so?"

There was not a single intonation of doubt in his voice, and in a sudden wild impulse she stretched out her hand to him with a gesture of simple eloquence.

"I have done what the world would utterly condemn, though I have no shadow of regret; but my life has been such that any man linked with it now would inevitably suffer. There must have been many occasions in which you have heard me referred to as a woman with a past. By that people mean something secret and hidden. The world speaks truly for once. In my past there is that which always must be hidden. People wonder why I have never re-married, and whisper there must be a reason which forbids it. They are right. If I wished to marry again I could not do so honorably, therefore I shall remain widowed to the end of my life."

"I should never care what the world said of you. You would be my wife, and I have love enough to suffice for us both."

The word "widowed" sprang up like a flame of light

in his heart. Secretly, he had always dreaded that her husband still lived, but the flame of hope died down as he saw the settled melancholy in her face.

"In common honor I can never become any man's wife, because there is a secret in which other innocent persons are involved. A secret I can confide to no one, not even to you, who love me so well that you trust me."

Her head drooped, and tears gathered in her eyes. In that moment all the regrets in her life seemed to pass. She had at least his faith. Would this faith live on, without one sign to show she deserved it?

He listened to her silently, meditatively.

Most men of the world would have thought that guilt certainly spoke in her confession, though in their infatuation they might not have greatly cared; but Carlton did not so think. His sympathies were too wide and true.

"I listen to you, Hilda," he answered gently; "but I do not believe you, even against yourself." All the courage within him rose in revolt, to fling off even the shadow of actual sin upon the woman he loved. His eyes met hers without wavering.

"I do not ask to share your secret. You say it concerns others. Then, what is it to me? I trust you absolutely. Will you not trust me?"

"I cannot accept so great a sacrifice. It is very noble, but how could we live as man and wife with this great gulf between us, which I should always try to prevent your bridging? Let us speak no more of this. What can it avail, except to make you suffer greater things?"

A bitter exclamation broke from him. "Yours are noble words; but it is so easy to utter them, so

hard to follow them. If you cared for me," he went on stormily, "you would know that there is not one thought in me that does not honor you. If you cared you would not bid me forget my love for you."

"Those are wild, unconsidered words," she rebuked him, gravely. "What good can they serve? As your friend——"

"Friendship is as cruel as hate," he vehemently retorted. "It's the worst cruelty—when I ask for bread you offer me a stone."

There was sharp suffering in his voice, and she was moved and shaken by the despairing hopelessness that rang in it.

"You only pain and wound me," she said very gently, "and I can hardly tell how to answer you. My life has been a very sad and complicated one, and I have suffered terribly. Only latterly have I known any real peace of mind. But nothing can ever alter the past—it is irrevocable."

She spoke calmly, unfalteringly, but with a firm resolve. "Do you not believe that if I could speak with honor I would reward your faith by telling you all?"

A flush passed over his face. He understood her.

"But," he urged, with sudden gentleness. "May it not be that you over-rate the obligations of honor? I know that many a noble-hearted woman has inexorably condemned herself to a severity of rule that a wide-minded judge of life would deem exaggerated, unnecessary. May this not be so with you?"

His voice shook over the last words. He could not think with calmness of the destiny he was bidden to accept. He had believed that if only she were free he could rouse her heart and make her love him. He

knew now that she was a widow, and his greatest fear was banished.

"Hear me," he entreated softly. "Is it not possible that you exaggerate the abnegation required of you? Yours is magnificent magnanimity, but it may surely be false justice to yourself and to me."

"It is stern justice, but absolute," she answered him. "What is done is done. I cannot redeem the past by adding dishonor to it."

The baffled sense of impotence, against a wall of immovable calamity, came over him. He had always been used to have his way with women, to see obstacles disappear, difficulties crumble. His good looks, his wealth and position, his easy charm had made life very simple for him. He had been tried by no sorrow, and till now had never known a woman whom he desired to make his wife. The sense that here was a tragedy whose meaning he could not fathom, that there was here a fate he could not change, brought a wholly unfamiliar sense of weakness, that could not be altered by his will. It came to him that this woman who owned such great beauty, who bore such a serene habit beneath the world's harshest stings, would not have rejected his love unless compelled by a destiny from which there was no escape.

A long silence fell between them. Where she lay back amongst the cushions her face was in shadow, whilst he sat by her side motionless, his head bent upon his breast. She watched him many moments, he, unconscious of her gaze, and whilst she did so, many conflicting emotions passed over the pale delicacy of her features. Her eyes were filled and shadowed by retrospection. She was quite unshaken in her resolve. Not even Agnes Howard realized how firm was her

determination to do him no wrong. The woman who had been the mistress of another for two years, and who had accepted a fortune at his death, whose husband had been a felon, and who held the secret of the Lake House locked in her breast, was no wife for the young owner of Great Glentworth. "I took my life in my own hands and defied the world. Love and Cecil Howard were what I deliberately chose. I must abide the consequences. One cannot have it both ways," she told herself, when she thought of what might have been, with a bitter-sweet regret. She was a woman still young. She had the ardor of youth still in her veins, and the desolation of abandoned youth in her heart. Honor looked cold beside love.

The muffled rumble of homeward bound motors rose up from the frozen moonlit roads. His guests were going home, and Claude was not there to bid them good-by. He had forgotten their existence. A clock struck three and she rose.

"I'm going home now. I am very tired," she said. Her voice faltered for a moment, then she recovered herself. "You say my offer of friendship is cruel; but at least it will be faithful to you. I believe in you, as you believe in me, and that is the highest trust that one human being can show to another. And now—good-by."

He took her hands in his and held them against his breast, whilst he looked down into the pathos of the beautiful eyes raised to his.

"Ah! don't think me indifferent, even to what seems to me so cold, Hilda," he whispered. "I believe in your innocence, as firmly as though you substantiated it with a thousand proofs. I reverence your devotion to honor. If I could not at least say that I would be

unfit to live. So this is good-by to love, and good-by to you—for a time; but, my darling, when I am able—I will claim the friendship you offer—but not now—it is impossible.”

In a long silence they looked into each other's eyes, and he knew at last what their parting was costing her. The suffering was not only his.

“For the first and last time, Claude,” she whispered, and he bent his lips to hers.

THE END



